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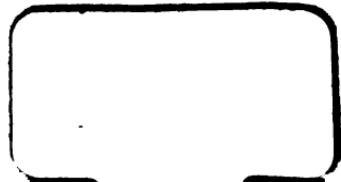


The Lady and the Burglar

Edgar Turner

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THE LADY AND THE BURGLAR



"She danced to and fro in front of the piano, possessed
by a wild fancy." (Page 158.)

The Lady and the Burglar

[Frontispiece]

THE LADY OR THE BURGLAR

Frank R. L.

THE MURKIN

BY HENRY MURKIN, AUTHOR OF "THE COOK."

"LADY OR BURGLAR" BY FRANK R. L.

London
WARD, LOCK & CO., LTD.

NEW YORK AND BOSTON

1903



THE LADY AND THE BURGLAR

A Fantastic Romance

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BY

EDGAR TURNER

AUTHOR OF "THE GIRL WITH FEET OF CLAY"

FRONTISPICE BY OSCAR WILSON

LONDON
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NEW YORK AND MELBOURNE
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The Lady and the Burglar

CHAPTER I

EARLY MORNING CALLERS

THE three men were mounted on bicycles. They had just left the main road from London, and were riding up the hill to the village, one leading, and the others following side by side. Their lamps were not lit, although it was a dark night.

"How much more of this, Powell?" asked one of the two behind.

"Nearly there," replied the man in front.

"Stick to it, Brown," added the other of the two behind. "Think of the Fluffy Fluff jewels."

The three men bent over the handles, and continued to ascend the hill. They were a curious trio. Dick Powell was a tall, good-looking fellow, aged about twenty-five, and clean-shaven except for a slight fair moustache. James Brown was short and heavily built, with a full black beard. Bill Spottem was clean-shaven and of medium size, and had a pro-

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minent double chin. He and Brown were both from thirty-five to forty years of age. All of them carried exceptionally large tool-bags on their saddles, and these bags contained not only the tools necessary for adjusting a bicycle, but also those for breaking into a house.

The three men were, in fact, burglars. Powell was their leader. He was clever but wayward, and had been many things during his short life. He had dramatic talent, and had been an actor ; he had musical ability, and had been a professional musician ; he could write, and had been a journalist. About two months before this particular night he decided to become a burglar, and invited Spottem and Brown to join him. Spottem had been a bookmaker, but was in retirement, owing to his clients having backed a series of winners and then inconsiderately demanded payment. Brown had been a clerk in a City office, but had recently been dismissed because of a mistake in the petty cash. Both after a little consideration accepted the invitation, and the firm of Powell, Brown & Spottem, Burglars, was established.

The fact that they were mounted on bicycles was due to Powell. He realised that there was keen competition among burglars, and resolved that his firm should be as up-to-date as possible. The members of other firms went to and from their work on foot or in dog-carts, for instance, but he, Brown, and Spottem should go on bicycles. Accordingly, out of the proceeds of their first burglary he purchased three, fitted with all the latest improvements, including pneumatic tyres, which were then a new invention.

"We'll get down here," said Powell, as they reached the top of the hill. "The village begins at the next corner."

The three dismounted. There was just enough light for them to distinguish one another. Brown took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

"I'm hot," he said.

"It's a stiff climb," said Spottem.

"A bit too stiff for me," said Brown.

Powell leaned his bicycle against the hedge, and folded his arms. Then he began to speak in a somewhat rhetorical manner.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we propose to-night to assume possession of the jewels of Miss Fluffy Fluff, the music-hall star. A week ago I heard that she had gone from London to this village for a quiet holiday. I followed her in disguise, and ascertained that she had taken a furnished house, and was living in it alone with a maid-servant. I also ascertained that she had brought the jewels with her, and that she kept them in a casket in her bedroom."

"We know all that," said Spottem, a little impatiently. "Let's cut talking, and get to work."

"Yes," said Brown. "Someone'll hear us if we're not careful."

"No danger of that," said Powell. "Everybody in the village except the policeman goes to bed at ten, and he goes at five minutes past. You must let me finish. When you interrupted me, I was leading up to something you do not know, but something you should know. Briefly, it is this. I and Miss Fluffy Fluff were at one time friends. She owes much to me. Indeed, but for me there would be no Miss

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Fluffy Fluff, and, what is perhaps more important, no Fluffy Fluff jewels."

Spottem and Brown looked at him incredulously.

"Do you remember her first song?" asked Powell.

"Yes," replied Spottem. "Let me see, how did it go:

'I'm a little piece of fluff,
A dear little, queer little piece of fluff,
A nicey, spicey, witty, pretty, good little piece of fluff,
Of fluffy, fluffy fluff, of fluffy, fluffy fluff.'

Like that, I think."

Powell nodded approvingly, and said:

"Something like that. And I wrote the song, words and music. I'm not proud of the fact. The words were idiotic, and the music wasn't much better. But the song hit the public hard, and made the girl. When I first met her, five years ago, she was singing at a third-rate social club under another name for half-a-crown a time. She gave a good show, and I saw she was the right stuff. We had a talk together, and I promised to write her a song, and to try to get her a turn with it at one of the big halls.

"I wrote *A Little Piece of Fluff*, taught it her myself, interviewed half-a-dozen managers, and at last got her a turn. I knew it would be a success, and it was. She was down in the programme as Miss Fluffy Fluff, and she was dressed for the part—fluffy white wool from head to foot, with a single red ribbon.

"The whole thing was artistically idiotic, and consequently it delighted the public. The refrain was taken up enthusiastically, and gallery and stalls again and again declared themselves to be dear little, queer

little pieces of fluff. The applause at the end of the song was terrific. The girl was recalled six or seven times, and that same night the management offered her a month's engagement on her own terms."

"Very gratifying," observed Brown.

"Very—for her. Before long she was drawing a hundred pounds a-week with that and other songs, and she still draws as much. But it was not so gratifying for me. Partly because I liked her, and partly because it seemed the proper thing to do in the circumstances, I proposed marriage to her. She refused—said that she intended to live for her career, that we were both too young to think of marriage, and a lot more nonsense of that sort.

"I persisted, and she became angry. Then we quarrelled violently, and then parted with mutual reproaches. We have not met since. For years she has been one of the stars of the London music-halls; for years she has been earning the salary of an ambassador; for years she has been adding jewel after jewel to her collection. And I—I who gave her her name—I who started her on her career—I who made her, in fact—what have I received? Nothing—absolutely nothing!"

"I am sorry," said Brown.

"So am I," said Spottem. "But really, Powell, we'd better get to work. What's the point of all this?"

"The point is," replied Powell, "that having enabled Miss Fluffy Fluff to acquire the jewels, I am entitled to a share."

"Quite right," said Spottem. "And if we've luck you'll have a third of them presently."

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Powell shook his head, and said :

"I shall have more than a third. We've agreed, I know, that the swag we get in these little burglaries shall be divided between us equally. These jewels, however, are exceptional. I am entitled to a share—call it a half—because I enabled Miss Fluffy Fluff to acquire them. That is to say, half are already mine, and must not be treated as swag. You see what I mean? When we get the jewels, I take half as my private property, and we divide the other half—the actual swag—between us in the usual way."

"This wants thinking over," said Brown.

"No, it doesn't," said Spottem. "What are the jewels worth, Powell?"

"I don't know exactly, but probably about six thousand pounds. She has spent half her income for a long time on them, and it's a big income. Yes, I should think about six thousand pounds."

"And you suggest that on settling day each of us should take a thousand and you four thousand?"

"Precisely. Three for my past association with Miss Fluffy Fluff, and one for my present association with you and Brown. Do you agree?"

"No!" said Spottem emphatically. "We start at scratch, or not at all. An agreement's an agreement. Two thousand each."

"Do you really mean—" began Powell.

"I do," said Spottem. "Equal shares on the lot. That's the only fair way. My mind's made up."

They glared at each other defiantly. Brown watched them, distressed at the unfortunate dispute. For a few moments there was silence, and then the clock of the village church struck the hour of two.

"Two! and it is daylight at four!" exclaimed Brown. "Are we going to get the jewels, or are we not?"

Powell bit his lip impatiently, and said to Spottem:

"Well?"

"My mind's made up," replied Spottem. "You'd better give in, because I won't."

"No, you'd rather spoil the job altogether and have nothing," said Powell angrily. "Fortunately, I've a little more sense."

"You agree then?" said Spottem.

"Oh, yes, I agree. Equal shares on the lot, if you like. I consider it unfair, but rather than spoil the job I agree. I daresay I shall be level with you some day. And now that that's settled, let's get to work. Am I still leader?"

"Of course," replied Spottem.

"Very well. Brown and I will do the trick to-night. You will stay here with the bicycles. That tyre's a bit slack; pump it up, and see that the rest are all right. Keep a sharp look-out, and be ready for us when we return."

Spottem nodded, and bent over the slack tyre, Powell and Brown took small dark lanterns and some tools from the bags attached to their bicycle saddles, and then walked up the road a few yards, turned the corner, and entered the village.

"This is the house," whispered Powell, after they had walked a few yards more.

Brown peered through the darkness, and saw that the house was a small detached one built on two floors. A garden, with fruit trees and a narrow

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gravelled path, lay between it and the road where they stood.

"In which room are the jewels?" he whispered.

"Miss Fluffy Fluff's bedroom. Top front one, left side. The back door is the easiest. Simple lock and no bolt."

"Shall I break in, or will you?"

Powell faced round on him indignantly, and said:

"How can you ask such a question? Have you no sense of the fitness of things?"

"What do you mean?" said Brown, in surprise.

"That he who breaks in will have to enter Miss Fluffy Fluff's bedroom to get the jewels. How much more fitting that it should be me than you! I once made a proposal of marriage to Miss Fluffy Fluff, and you—why, you've never even met her!"

"But—"

"We won't discuss the matter. I shall break in, and you will stop here. Whistle if there is danger. By the way, the policeman lives in that cottage over there next the inn. Turn your eye on it occasionally."

Powell opened the garden gate quietly, and walked towards the house. Brown watched him until he was out of sight, and then settled down to await his return. This was, he reflected, by far the biggest job they had yet tackled. Would it come off all right? He considered the chances of success. Powell was a quick and careful worker, although comparatively new to the business. The village was one of those dull, old-fashioned places whose inhabitants sleep soundly. London was only twenty miles away, and would be

reached on the bicycles in a couple of hours or less. Yes, he decided, the chances were certainly good.

Half an hour passed without any sign, however, and he began to be anxious. After glancing up and down the road and at the policeman's cottage, he stepped inside the gate and along the path. Three or four yards from the house he stopped and looked up at the top left-hand window. A beam of light passed across a corner quickly. He knew that it came from a moving lantern; and he knew that Powell was at work in the room.

"Help! Help! Thieves!"

Satisfied with what he had seen, Brown was walking back to the road when he heard these words screamed by some woman. He paused, affrighted.

"Help! Help! Thieves!"

Again and again they rang out. Weak and trembling, he gazed at the house from which they came. The top left-hand window remained dark and closed, but the next one was lit up and opened. A woman leaned from it, listened for a moment, and then also began to scream. Brown understood that she was the maid-servant, and that the woman who had screamed before was Miss Fluffy Fluff.

Presently there were other sounds which told that a struggle was going on within the house. A door was slammed. Pieces of furniture were dragged about and thrown to the floor. Two voices, one a man's and one a woman's, were raised against each other angrily. The door was slammed a second time.

"I know you, Dick Powell, I know you! Give me my jewels!"

"Mine, Fluffy Fluff—mine! Good-bye!"

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Brown heard these words, and then a great shattering of glass. Out of the top left-hand window leaped Powell, a jewel casket in his hand. He alighted safely, but stumbled and pitched forward at full length. Brown shook off the stupor his fear had caused, and ran to the spot. Before he reached it, however, Powell had regained his feet, and was standing erect and apparently unhurt.

"Are you all right?" asked Brown.

"Yes, yes! Come on," replied Powell, putting the casket in his pocket.

They raced down the path, pursued by the screams of the two women. As they neared the gate, they saw more lighted windows and heard new voices. The village was evidently aroused.

"On to the bicycles," said Powell.

"Stop!" shouted someone.

It was the ostler of the inn. He had heard the outcry, and had flung on some clothes and hurried to the rescue. Armed with a pitchfork, he stood in the middle of the road.

"Stop!" he repeated, as they passed the gate.
"Stop, or I'll stick yer both."

Brown retreated into the garden. Powell stepped aside, intending to slip by if possible. Then he stepped back again. Something he had seen had changed his intention.

Spottem was creeping up behind the ostler. He also had heard the outcry. At first he had meditated immediate flight, but afterwards had decided to stand by Powell and Brown, and had wheeled the bicycles round the corner. Now he had left them, and was about to attack the ostler.

Suddenly another character appeared on the scene. The village policeman, partly dressed and rather frightened, rushed out of his cottage. He saw Powell and the ostler facing each other, and he saw Spottem advancing towards them. Grasping the situation, he shouted :

“Look out, Joe! Look out behind!”

The ostler turned round, and in the same moment Spottem sprang forward. The ostler made a wild thrust with the pitchfork. Spottem dodged it, drew back his arm, and then shot it with all his force at the ostler. He staggered under the blow. Before he could recover, Spottem followed it with another. Half stunned, the ostler fell to the ground.

“Well hit!” cried Powell.

“Quick!” cried Spottem. “The bicycles are under that tree.”

They started running. Brown tottered out of the garden after them, evidently quite unnerved. The policeman noticed his state, and, deciding that he would be an easy capture, seized hold of him as he passed. Brown struggled feebly, and called to Powell and Spottem for help. They stopped. The lights of the inn showed them what had happened.

“The fool!” said Spottem. “Done on the post. Shall we try to get him away?”

“Yes, for our own sake,” replied Powell.

They hurried back. The ostler still lay on the ground, and the pitchfork was beside him. Powell snatched it up and thrust at the policeman. With a shout of alarm, he released his hold and jumped aside.

“Run, Brown, run!” cried Powell.

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"I can't," replied Brown piteously. "My legs won't move. I was never meant for a burglar."

"Help the baby," said Powell, "while I keep the crowd off."

Spottem put an arm round Brown, and led him towards the tree against which he had leaned the bicycles. Powell followed, protecting the retreat with the pitchfork. After him, at a respectful distance, walked the landlord of the inn, who had just come out, and the policeman.

"Pull yourself together," said Spottem to Brown, as they reached the tree. "It's odds on now."

"Start me, and I shall be all right," said Brown, desperately clambering on to his bicycle.

Spottem steadied it, and pushed it along for a few yards. Then, as Brown rode round the corner safely, he returned to Powell, who had waited by the tree.

"Charge those two idiots," he whispered, wheeling the remaining bicycles into the road, "and then jump on."

Powell rushed forward, and made the landlord give ground in one direction and the policeman in another. Throwing down the pitchfork, he rushed back again. Spottem handed him his bicycle. In a moment both had mounted and were pedalling hard, and in two or three more both were out of sight.

The landlord and the policeman stood silent and stupid, until presently they heard footsteps. Half-a-dozen people were approaching. Among them was the ostler, who had recovered from the blows he had received. Among them also was Miss Fluffy Fluff. She was wearing a dressing-gown and slippers, and

her hair was loose on her shoulders. She looked very young and pretty, and very angry.

"They've gone, miss," said the policeman ; "and I'm afeard there's nothing to be done."

"Nothing to be done, and all my jewels stolen !" she cried. "Everything's to be done. Have you a fast horse, landlord ?"

"Tol'rably fast," replied the landlord.

"Saddle it, and ride after them," she continued, turning to the ostler. "Take the London road ; they're sure to keep to that. And you, Mr. Policeman, go to the railway station. There's a telegraph man there ; set him to work. My jewels, my jewels ! I will have my jewels ! A hundred pounds—five hundred pounds reward !"

The ostler and the policeman ran off, eager to earn the reward. For a time Miss Fluffy Fluff paced up and down, repeating the words, "My jewels, my jewels ! I will have my jewels !" Then, feeling cold and miserable and near to crying, she gathered her dressing-gown close to her and hurried indoors.

CHAPTER II

THE CURIOUSLY-SHAPED TREE

POWELL and Spottem raced down the hill from the village, turned their bicycles into the main road, and continued at top speed towards London. Neither spoke until a mile or two had been covered. Then Spottem remembered that he did not know the result of the burglary, and said :

“Have you got the jewels?”

“Yes,” replied Powell, slackening speed; “a difficult job, though. They were locked up in a drawer, and I broke open three before hitting on the right one. Then, just as I had them in my hand, Miss Fluffy Fluff woke. She saw me, and screamed.”

“I heard her,” remarked Spottem.

“I should think so. She screamed loud enough for everybody in the county to have heard. And she didn’t stop at that. When I’d recovered from the surprise, I closed my lantern and hurried towards the door. She sprang out of bed, seized hold of me, and clung like a police inspector. Up and down the room we struggled in the dark. The fact that there had once been talk of marriage between us made me reluctant to hurt her, and of course handicapped me greatly. At last I broke loose. Unfortunately, how-

ever, I took the wrong direction. Realising this, she turned quickly, locked the door, and hurled the key away. The window was now the only means of escape. I rushed to it, and put my hand on the latch. But before I could open it Miss Fluffy Fluff had seized me again. I shook her off with a violent effort, and then shouted a good-bye, jumped sheer through the glass, and fortunately reached the ground safely. The rest you know."

"A plucky girl!" commented Spottem. "I'm half sorry we called."

Powell laughed, and said :

"So am I. Still, we'll console ourselves with the jewels. By the way, isn't it about time we caught up with Brown? He hadn't much start, you know. Let's put on the pace a bit."

For four or five miles they rode at a fast rate, but without passing anything except a market waggon.

"He's travelling pretty smartly for a man of his build," said Powell. "What a funk he was in when he started!"

"We must go for him about that. Suppose we risk a shout? He can't be far ahead."

"All right," said Powell. "Now then—together."

They shouted, and presently heard a faint answering shout.

"That's his voice," said Spottem. "Come on!"

In a few moments they overtook him. He was a pitiful sight. His hands were clenched hard on the bicycle handles, and his legs were moving slowly and clumsily. Big drops of sweat stood on his forehead. His body was swaying to and fro as if about to topple from the saddle.

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"You're killing yourself!" cried Powell. "You must have a rest."

"Pull up here," added Spottem. "We'll stay with you."

"Thanks," moaned Brown. "I'm simply knocked up."

They dismounted. Brown handed his bicycle to Powell and Spottem, with a word of apology, and then sank to the ground and lay at their feet, breathing heavily. They looked at him contemptuously.

"You were right, Brown, when you said you weren't meant for a burglar," observed Powell. "I'm afraid we've got to dissolve partnership with you. Somehow you don't seem to help us much. We'll give you your share of the swag up to date, of course. You had better invest it in an undertaker's business, and settle down to a quiet life."

"I will," said Brown, closing his eyes wearily. "Anything rather than this."

"Then that's arranged," said Powell. "And now, Spottem, you and I may as well examine those jewels."

"Good," replied Spottem.

They wheeled the bicycles to the side of the road, and sat near them under a hedge. Powell took the casket from his pocket, opened it, and laid it on his knee. They gazed at the jewels admiringly. There were not many, but most of the stones were diamonds, and some of these were large and evidently very valuable. Without doubt, it was a remarkably fine collection.

"I like Miss Fluffy Fluff's taste," whispered Spottem, after a short silence. "They're worth every penny of

six thousand. It's a big haul. Two thousand each. Three thousand if—if we left Brown out."

Powell shook his head, closed the casket, and replaced it in his pocket.

"But we won't leave him out," he said coldly. "I'm surprised at your making the suggestion. Until we definitely separate from him, we will give him his third. Let us be as honourable as we can, consistently with our profession."

"You're a nice chap to talk about being honourable," said Spottem angrily. "Only an hour ago you yourself put in a claim for two-thirds instead of one. What about that?"

"The claim was a just one," replied Powell, with dignity. "I withdrew it because it seemed likely to prevent our getting to work. You're an ass to mention it now."

He stood up as he finished speaking. Spottem also rose, and, facing him, said :

"I'm an ass, am I? Well, I'll give you your name, my sportsman, as soon as you like. You're a comic opera burglar, that's what you are. Take this bicycle idea of yours. Take your waxed moustache. Take the speeches a yard long you're always making. Take—"

"Suppose we take our departure," said Powell, with a laugh. "What's the use of our going on like this? I got the jewels even if I am a comic opera burglar, and you knocked down the man with the pitchfork, even if you are an ass. Let's drop quarrelling, and push on to London."

"Very well," replied Spottem, still a little angrily ; "I've said all I want to say."

They wheeled the bicycles back to Brown, and found that he had gone to sleep. Spottem woke him with a kick. He started up, stared about him wildly, and suddenly realised where he was and what had happened.

"Is there danger?" he asked anxiously.

"Not more than before," replied Powell. "Jump on; we've been here long enough. Feel better?"

"Much. That sleep's quite pulled me round."

They mounted, and rode on at an easy pace. Brown and Spottem spoke little, the former because he needed all his breath, and the latter because he was in a bad humour. Powell kept up a flow of frivolous talk, however, as if determined to live up to the name he had just been given.

They had covered several more miles, when Spottem silenced Powell with a gesture, and said:

"I hear something. We're being chased."

Brown groaned, and listened intently.

"You're right," said Powell, also listening. "That's the sound of a horse trotting—and trotting after us, too. We're not out of the wood yet."

They increased the pace, and rode swiftly side by side. A minute or two passed, and the sound died away. But they knew that the danger was not over. Day was dawning, and might presently discover them to their pursuer. Then he would be able to keep them in sight, and to raise a hue and cry when they were near London.

At the top of a hill Spottem turned in his saddle and looked back along the road.

"I can't see any one," he said.

"Good," said Powell. "A big spurt and we shall be safe."

But although Spottem saw no one when he turned, they themselves were seen immediately afterwards. The ostler of the village inn, who was the horseman following them, had been hidden by a bend in the road. Now he came round it, in time to see them begin their spurt and pass beyond the next bend. As they disappeared, he whipped his horse into a gallop and muttered :

"Seems as I've got a good chance for that 'ere reward. But 'ow to collar 'em? That's the puzzle."

At first he was disposed to attempt the capture alone, relying on the moral persuasion of a broken old pistol he had brought with him. Recollection of his former encounter with Spottem, however, caused him to change his mind. Assistance of some sort or other, he decided, was absolutely necessary. But where was it to be obtained quickly?

He was asking himself this question when two mounted policemen on night duty trotted into the road from a side turning just in front of him. Overjoyed at the meeting, he pulled up and hurriedly explained matters. A minute later all three were moving towards London, which was only five or six miles away, as fast as their tired horses could carry them.

Powell, Spottem, and Brown were by this time far ahead. Brown was leading. The spurt had taxed him terribly, but the thought that they were near the end of their journey encouraged him to desperate efforts. Still the pace he set was not a great one,

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and the distance between them and their pursuers gradually decreased.

"Another mile, and the London houses begin," said Powell, after a lengthy silence.

"We'd better separate there," said Spottem. "It'll be safer if anyone's following us."

"Why not take one of these cross roads we're coming to? We'll be just as safe, and we'll be able to keep together."

"All right. Which of them?"

"This side," said Powell. "We can easily work round in that direction."

They reached the cross roads, and turned into the one indicated. For a few yards they found the surface as good as that which they had left, but then it became particularly bad. A long stretch had, in fact, been re-made and not properly rolled, and flints of all sizes lay loose here and there.

They were proceeding very carefully, when suddenly Brown said :

"Good heavens! I've got a puncture."

"Hang it! so've I," said Spottem.

"Get off," said Powell, "and let's have a look."

The three dismounted and examined their tyres. Powell's were both hard, but those on the back wheels of the others were empty and flat.

"Bits of flint," said Spottem. "I wish I had the fool here that laid them. I'd lay something on him jolly soon."

"Hush!" said Brown, "we're being chased again."

He had heard the beat of horse hoofs approaching from the direction of the village. Now the others also heard.

"There are several this time," said Powell. "Quick! put the bicycles under the hedge, and lie down beside them."

The three did this. Presently the ostler and the policeman reached the cross roads, glanced up them, and seeing nothing suspicious, continued towards London. As soon as they had passed, the three rose. Powell brushed some dust from his coat, and remarked:

"The worst of being a burglar is that you can't always look dignified."

"Blow looking dignified," said Spottem, whose bad humour had been intensified by the recent mishap. "What about these tyres? Come on."

They wheeled the bicycles against a field gate. Spottem and Brown produced repairing outfits, and began to search for the punctures. Powell sat on the gate watching them.

"Better come down from there before someone sees you," growled Spottem to Powell. "We ain't at the winning-post yet, and don't you think we are."

"You mean—"

"I mean that between us we're managing things pretty sillily, and that it's two to one we get caught and lose the jewels."

"Then I've got an idea," said Powell, jumping into the field, and picking up a spade which had been left there by the road menders. "While you're finishing that little job, I'll find some out-of-the-way spot and bury them."

"Bury them!"

"Yes, bury them. We can dig them up as soon as it's quite safe. Don't you see? Even if we're

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caught we shan't lose them. They'll be waiting for us when we come out of quod."

"This is more of your comic opera business," said Spottem. "How are we to know where you bury them? How are we to know that you won't dig them up by yourself and bolt? You can't nobble horses in this stable, my lad."

"Don't talk nonsense. If I had meant bolting with them I could have done so just now. Besides, I'm not anxious to do the burying alone. You can come with me if you like."

Spottem thought for a moment or two, and then said, somewhat less aggressively:

"Perhaps, after all, it's the best plan. But we must be quick. Look here, Brown, I'm a smarter hand with these tyres than you, and I'll fix them up while you go with Powell. I don't mind trusting the two of you, even if I won't trust one. Dig a good deep hole, and take care you remember the place, so as to be able to describe it to me exactly. Don't be longer than you can help. I'll ring one of the bicycle bells if there's danger."

Powell started to walk across the field. Brown climbed over the gate, and caught up to him in a few steps.

"Which way shall we go?" he asked.

"To the left of that stile, and through that clump of trees," replied Powell, pointing with the spade. "We shall be out of sight of Spottem there, and that'll give us a chance to get quits with him. We both owe him a grudge."

"On what account?"

"Several. For instance, he had the cheek just

now to insinuate that I was trying to abscond with the jewels."

"Still, I don't know that I ought to side against him because of that," said Brown hesitatingly.
"After all, it isn't my affair."

Powell laughed, and said :

"Well, here's something that is. When you were asleep on the road he suggested to me that we should go halves, and leave you out altogether. I didn't mean to tell you, but it doesn't matter much."

For a little while Brown walked along in silence, a pained expression on his face. Then he said :

"You spoke of getting quits with him. I'm on. But how ?"

"Oh, only a joke. We'll bury the jewels in one place now, and dig for them in another when we return with him."

"And pretend that somebody else has found them ?"

"Precisely. Act as if we're surprised and grieved ; suggest that a tramp or a labourer must have been near and watched our movements, and so on as artistically as possible. Of course, we'll dig in the right place afterwards, and share out honourably. But we shall give him a good fright."

"And he may give us something," said Brown dubiously.

"You mean he may suspect we're swindling him, and go for us? Not if we play the game properly. Violent language and an imaginary assault on the tramp or the labourer should be all. At anyrate, we'll run the risk for the sake of the joke."

By this time they had gone some distance, and

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were in a field quite hidden from the road. They looked about them for a suitable spot for their purpose.

"Somewhere here would do," remarked Brown.

"Yes, but where?" said Powell. "Ah! I have it. Look at that tree!"

The tree to which he referred was a young elm near one end of the field. It was shaped very curiously. Just above the ground the trunk split into three. The parts continued separately for a little way, with narrow openings between them. Then they joined together, and the trunk was again straight and whole.

"I never saw anything like it before," said Brown.

"A freak of nature placed here specially for us to mark the burial-place," said Powell enthusiastically. "We'll count so many steps from it, and then dig. Captain Kidd, Dick Turpin, and all the grand old men in our line have done this sort of thing. We'll be as like them as possible. By Jove! we'll even prepare a cryptogram describing the place, and give it to Spottem without the key."

While he was speaking they had hurried up to the tree. Brown, who had caught some of Powell's enthusiasm, said :

"From which side shall we count?"

"Twenty steps due north," said Powell thoughtfully. "Yes, that has the true romantic sound. Twenty steps due north let it be."

He took a small compass from his watch-chain, held it in front of him, and walked in the direction to which it pointed. Brown accompanied him. Both

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looked intently at the compass, and both counted the steps aloud.

"Twenty," they cried together.

The next moment they fell heavily to the bottom of a deep but fortunately dry ditch. The twentieth step had brought them over the brink, and they had plunged in blindly.

"As I remarked before," said Powell, picking himself up, "the worst of being a burglar is that you can't always look dignified. Are you hurt?"

"Not much," replied Brown. "What do we do now? Count again due south?"

"No, this will do admirably. Who would think of searching in a ditch for jewels? We'll bury them where we are. By the way, isn't that a pick over there?"

"Yes."

"Fetch it, my boy. The way this farm is studded with agricultural implements is extraordinary. But it is also convenient. Thanks to them, we shall dig a very respectable hole."

Brown got the pick, and returned to Powell. They estimated where the twentieth step would have touched if the ditch had been on the level of the field, and then one began to claw up the earth and the other to shovel it aside. Both worked energetically, and at the end of a few minutes they had reached a considerable depth.

"I think this'll do," said Powell.

Brown nodded, and Powell took the jewel casket from his pocket and dropped it into the hole. After gazing down regretfully for a moment or two, they proceeded to replace the earth. When they had

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done this, they climbed out of the ditch, and then walked towards the road.

"We are sure to remember this," said Brown, stopping at the curiously shaped tree.

"Quite sure!" replied Powell. "Who could forget these two slits in the trunk like two great eyes?"

"But what are we to say to Spottem?"

"Ah, yes! that little joke. We'll tell him we buried them here, instead of twenty steps away. Later on, as another little joke, we'll prepare the cryptogram I spoke of, and give it to him to solve."

They walked on in silence until they entered the clump of trees through which they had passed before. Then Powell cast the spade down, and said:

"Better get rid of these things. We may meet someone."

"I don't want to. I've had quite enough excitement already," said Brown, sending the pick after the spade. "I wonder whether Spottem has finished those tyres?"

"So do I."

Again they walked on in silence. Presently they came in sight of the field gate. Spottem was standing by it, bending over the bicycles.

"It doesn't look as if he's finished," said Brown.

"No," said Powell. "Some of these punctures need such a lot of repairing, unfortunately. Hullo! what's the matter?"

Spottem had started up, and was staring furtively round the hedge by the gate.

"Hurry!" cried Powell, suspecting danger.

They began to run. As they did so, Spottem

turned, saw them, and beckoned frantically. They increased their pace, but the next moment he seized one of the bicycles and rode off. Hardly had he gone when they heard the dreaded sound of horsemen.

The horsemen were the ostler and the policemen. They had continued as far as London, but had returned on learning from a pedestrian that their quarry had not passed. At the cross roads they had alighted to rest the horses, and directly afterwards had seen Spottem pedalling away. Now they were mounted again, and were riding in pursuit.

Powell and Brown reached the gate, scrambled over it, and seized the remaining bicycles. The back tyres of both were flat. Spottem had not succeeded in repairing the punctures, and the bicycle he had taken was Powell's.

"He's all right!" wailed Brown.

"But we're not, hang him!" muttered Powell.
"Try them as they are."

They leaped on. As they came into the open road from the shelter of the hedge, the horsemen saw them and shouted. But although the bicyclists had only a few yards' start, there seemed a chance that they would escape. They were getting up speed in spite of the flat tyres, and the horses were already almost dead beat.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!" cried the ostler.

The pistol he carried was useless, and the threat was an idle one. But Brown did not know this, and swerved from side to side in fright.

"Look out!" said Powell, avoiding him with difficulty.

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Brown did not heed, and swerved again. This time Powell failed to avoid him, and bicycles and riders collided and fell heavily. The horsemen hurried to the spot. As they reached it, Powell and Brown staggered to their feet, bruised and shaken.

"I surrender," said Powell, realising that the game was up.

"And so do I," said Brown.

The policemen dismounted, and handcuffed them together. The ostler laughed gleefully.

"That's the man with the jewels," he said, pointing to Powell.

"You're mistaken, my friend," said Powell slowly. "I haven't got any jewels."

The ostler sprang to the ground, and hastily searched first Powell and then Brown. Not finding the jewels, he said :

"One of you two had them. Where are they?"

Powell looked along the road in the direction Spottem had taken, and shrugged his shoulders suggestively.

"What! you gave 'em to that double-chinned, punching chap, and he's gone off with 'em?"

"I refuse," replied Powell, "to make any statement which may incriminate myself."

"Quite right," observed the policemen simultaneously. "Anything you say will be used against you."

The ostler turned to them, and exclaimed :

"The double-chinned chap's the man. Can we catch him? Miss Fluffy Fluff's offered five 'undred reward."

They examined the horses to see whether any

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more work could be got out of them. While they were doing this, Powell drew Brown aside, and whispered :

"Stick to it that Spottem has them. If he isn't caught, we'll get them without any trouble when we've served our time."

"I understand," said Brown, with an attempt at a smile. "He has them, sure enough."

Presently the ostler and the policemen decided that pursuit of Spottem was impossible. Placing Powell and Brown in front, each with one of the bicycles in his free hand, they set out for the nearest police station.

CHAPTER III

A JUDGE WHO WENT TO FRANCE

POWELL and Brown were formally committed for trial on account of the burglary, and in due course were placed in the dock. A warder was stationed behind them, but they contrived to exchange a few whispered words without his noticing that they did so.

"Have you stuck to it that Spottem's got the jewels?" asked Powell.

"Yes," replied Brown.

"Good! I've just heard that he hasn't been caught."

The charge against them was read out, and both pleaded "Not guilty." The judge then inquired whether they were legally represented, and on learning that they were not, asked if one of the barristers present would be kind enough to act for them. A gentleman with a dull, heavy face stood up. Powell looked at him critically, and decided that his assistance would do them more harm than good. Accordingly, after consulting Brown, he stated that they were much obliged for the offer, but that, for reasons which must be obvious to the Court, they preferred to conduct their own defence. The gentleman with the dull, heavy face sat down in some confusion, and the

judge, suppressing a smile, directed the prosecuting counsel to open the case.

The first witness called was one of the two policemen. He deposed to the chase along the road to London, and to the arrest of the prisoners, and the escape of a third man who was with them. He also deposed to various tools used by burglars having been found in the possession of the prisoners.

"But the jewels were not so found?" put in the judge.

"No, my lord," replied the policeman. "Our theory is that the third man went off with them."

"And he has not yet been caught?"

"No, my lord. But we've got a clue."

"Ah, yes! you've got a clue, and he's got the jewels. A very pleasant arrangement, from his point of view."

There was some laughter at this remark. As it ended, the policeman left the witness-box, and the ostler took his place. He was employed, he said, at the inn opposite the house where Miss Fluffy Fluff lived. He was awakened at the time of the burglary by loud screams, and at once dressed and hurried out. Immediately afterwards he saw two men leaving the garden of the house.

"And you identify the prisoners as those two men?" interrogated the prosecuting counsel.

"Yes, both of 'em."

"I should like to ask the witness a question or two on this point," said Powell.

"You may do so," said the judge.

"Was the night you refer to a dark or a light one?" asked Powell.

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"Dark," replied the ostler; "and you know it was, as well as I does."

"Are the streets of the village where you say this happened lit by gas or in any other way?"

"No, and there ain't no village of its size as is."

"You admit," said Powell dramatically, "that the night was a dark one, and that the streets of the village are not lit. How, then, could you see the two men? How, then, can you pretend to identify us as them? Answer me that, and remember you're on your oath."

Some of the jury nodded approval. The ostler stood silent and perplexed, until the prosecuting counsel came to his aid.

"I take it," he said persuasively, "that although the night was dark, it was not so dark as to prevent your seeing a person who was quite near to you?"

"That's just it," answered the ostler eagerly. "I dentifies these two right enough. I'd bet a 'orse to an oat they're the chaps. They ran clean up to me, and of course I saw 'em."

Powell smiled derisively, but the counsel was satisfied.

"That'll do," he said. "Go on. What did you do when you saw the two men leaving the garden?"

The ostler continued his story, describing picturesquely his brief encounter with the burglars, his departure from the village on horseback, his meeting with the policemen, his superintending of the arrest of Powell and Brown, and his sorrow at the escape of Spottem.

"What was this third man like?" asked the judge.

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"A double-chinned, clean-shaven two-year-old, yer lordship, who can punch as 'ard as a first-class 'eavy weight prize-fighter," replied the ostler.

"An epic description," observed Powell.

"Silence, sir," said the judge. "Is the man known to the police?"

"No, my lord," replied the counsel. "But they're making exhaustive inquiries, and they hope to trace him before long."

"A pity that the one who escaped should have been the one who is supposed to have stolen the jewels."

"Pardon me, my lord. He had them in his possession at the time he escaped, but he did not actually remove them from the house. I have evidence to the effect that it was the prisoner Powell who did that."

"Very curious that Powell should have given them to him. Why not have kept them himself until the moment for sharing out came? That would seem to have been the natural course."

"I have two theories explaining the transfer," said the counsel. "One is that the third man was the leader of the band, and was thus in the habit of taking charge of all booty. The other is that the jewels were entrusted to him because he was better equipped for flight than were the others. Their bicycles had both sustained severe punctures and were almost unrideable, while his was presumably in sound condition."

"The theories are reasonable," commented the judge. "Proceed."

While the ostler was concluding his evidence,

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Powell and Brown again contrived to exchange a few whispered words unobserved.

"Things are going well," said Powell.

"I don't think so," said Brown.

"I mean well so far as the jewels are concerned. They'll be ours when we're free. Hush!"

The ostler left the box, and for a few moments there was silence. Then the judge said :

"Is Miss Fluffy Fluff in court? I think it would be well to have her evidence at this stage."

"I regret to have to inform you, my lord," said the counsel, "that she is not able to attend. The shock of her loss, and an after exposure to the night air in somewhat insufficient attire, brought on an illness from which she is only just recovering. I will, however, read an affidavit from her."

The affidavit stated that the jewels were worth about eight thousand pounds, and were the absolute property of Miss Fluffy Fluff; it gave full details of the burglary, and of the struggle in the bedroom; and it accused Powell, by name and description, of being the man who stole the jewels.

"I think the jury will appreciate the force of that," said the counsel, when he had finished reading the document. "I will now call another witness."

This was Miss Fluffy Fluff's servant. She said her room was next to that of her mistress. On the night in question she heard screams, got up, lit a candle, and opened the window. A man was standing in the garden below. She was not prepared to swear that he was Brown, but he was bearded like him, and was about his size. Presently another man jumped from her mistress's room. This was Powell, she thought,

but again she was not prepared to swear to the identity.

"The young lady is not convincing," observed Powell. "For instance, because my fellow-prisoner wears a beard and is rather short, she insinuates that he was one of those two burgling scoundrels. Now you, my lord, also wear a beard, and are rather short."

"Sir," said the judge sternly, "this amounts to contempt of Court."

"Then," said Powell, "as it originated with the young lady, I should commit her for it if I were you."

The judge frowned, but there was a twinkle in his eye which belied the frown. He was both amused and angry, and found a difficulty in deciding what action to take. The prosecuting counsel perceived this, and said :

"Shall I proceed, my lord?"

"Yes," said the judge, glad to be relieved of the necessity of coming to a decision. "I will refer to the prisoner's ill-advised conduct at a later stage."

The counsel turned to Miss Fluffy Fluff's servant, and said :

"What happened after you saw the second man jump down to the first one?"

"Oh, then, sir," she replied, "they ran out of the garden, and mistress puts on her dressing-gown, and runs after them. And when she comes back, she was that tired and cold she could hardly stand. And she's been ill ever since, and the doctor says that her throat's all gone wrong, and that she's lost her voice, and won't be able to sing any more."

There was a movement of sympathy. Everybody knew who Miss Fluffy Fluff was, and what a terrible

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thing this would be for her. The foreman of the jury, who was a frequenter of music halls, and a great admirer of her, scowled at the prisoners angrily.

Powell noticed him, and said :

"Look here, my friend, you needn't upset yourself. She may have lost her voice, but she wasn't a Patti, you know."

"Silence, sir," said the judge. "You are doing no good by this display of callousness. Model your behaviour on that of your companion. He, I am glad to observe, is properly sensible of the gravity of his position."

"Thank you, sir, thank you!" said Brown earnestly.

"I think," said the judge to the prosecuting counsel, "the jury have heard enough to enable them to form an opinion. Perhaps you would submit the case at once?"

"I should like to produce two more witnesses first," replied the counsel.

"I don't think it necessary. Still, produce them if you wish."

"Thank you, my lord."

The witnesses were called. One was the village policeman, and the other the landlord of the village inn. Both swore positively to the identity of the prisoners with the two men in the garden. In addition, the landlord expressed his belief that Powell, disguised with an eye-glass and a false beard, had had a whisky and soda at the inn a day or two before the burglary.

"And now, my lord," said the counsel, "I submit the case. I myself do not entertain the slightest doubt as to it, and I do not think anyone else can."

The evidence is absolutely convincing. Powell removed the jewels from the house, and Brown was his accomplice before and after the fact. Both are guilty, and, on the grounds that the burglary was attended by violence, and that the property stolen has not been recovered, I ask for exemplary sentences on both."

"Prisoners," demanded the judge, "have you anything to say before I sum up?"

"Only that I'm very sorry, and that if I'm let off this time I'll never come here again," whimpered Brown.

"And you?"

"Nothing," replied Powell recklessly. "I might plead that I am the sole support of my two widowed grandmothers, or I might argue that when arrested I was enjoying my customary early morning bicycle ride round the suburbs; but I will do neither. You have my permission to sum up, my lord."

The judge did not comment on these two speeches, but at once began his address to the jury. He shared with the prosecuting counsel, he said, the opinion that the evidence was convincing. There had been, in fact, no serious attempt to rebut it in any detail. Powell had interpolated various remarks, but none of them was worthy of a moment's consideration. There was only one possible verdict, and he would be obliged if that were returned promptly, as the case had already taken more time than its nature warranted. Probably, he concluded, the jury would not think it necessary to leave the court.

The jury did not. They collected together at one end of their box, and for about half a minute made a

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show of intelligent deliberation. Then the foreman stood up, and announced that they had agreed upon the verdict.

"Guilty, or not guilty?" demanded the judge.

"Guilty," replied the foreman.

Brown leaned forward on the rail of the dock and sobbed. Powell drew away from him and said :

"The verdict is a true one; we are guilty. There are, however, mitigating circumstances. Will you hear them, my lord, before you pass sentence?"

"I do not understand," said the judge, "how there can be mitigating circumstances. Besides, even if there are, you should have mentioned them at an earlier stage."

"I could not, without stultifying the formal plea of 'Not guilty.' The fact is, I have a moral claim to a share of the jewels. Miss Fluffy Fluff is, as you know, a music-hall star, earning a huge salary. Now, I got her her first engagement, and I wrote her her first song, which, as you know, was called *A Little Piece of Fluff*. Therefore, my lord, I argue—"

"You are going too fast," interrupted the judge. "I do not know that Miss Fluffy Fluff is a music-hall star, and I do not know a song called *A Little Piece of Fluff*."

"Why, she's famous all over the world," cried Powell, "and the song was on every barrel organ for years!"

"The depositions before me contain nothing to that effect, and, speaking of the matter in my judicial capacity, I know only what they do contain. But we will leave that point. What are the

mitigating circumstances you wish to urge? Be brief."

"Oh, hang it all! I've finished," said Powell impatiently. "Your innocent-judge joke has completely spoiled my argument."

The judge did not seem so indignant at this as might have been expected. He looked round the court blandly, coughed twice, and then said:

"Prisoners, the jury have found you guilty, and I am about to pronounce sentence. The burglary for which you have been tried was a particularly daring one, and I should be failing in my duty if I showed leniency. You, Brown, who appear to have played a somewhat subordinate part, I sentence to five years' penal servitude. You, Powell, the prime mover, the man who actually broke into the house, I sentence to six years' penal servitude."

Powell turned pale, and clutched at the rail of the dock. He had not considered the possibility of a distinction being made between him and Brown, and the sentences came upon him as a rude shock. The consequences of the difference might, he realised, be very serious. Brown would be out of prison a year sooner than he, and during that time would have the jewels at his sole mercy.

"My lord," he cried, "this is grossly unfair! I am no worse than he. It was merely by chance that I was the one who broke into the house."

"Silence!" said the judge. "Remove the prisoners."

Two warders seized them and hurried them away. As the door closed behind them, the judge stooped towards the clerk, and whispered:

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"He deserved that extra year."

"Yes," replied the clerk; "he was very insolent to your lordship."

"I could have passed over that," said the judge. "What I could not pass over was the fact that he wrote that awful *Little Piece of Fluff*. The song was a public nuisance. Believe me, I positively went to France to avoid it when it was at the height of its vogue."

Powell and Brown were both taken into a room at the back of the court. Soon afterwards they were separated. Just before this, however, Powell hissed into Brown's ear:

"Don't touch the jewels till I'm out. If you do, I'll hunt you down and kill you."

"I won't," murmured Brown. "I swear I won't!"

CHAPTER IV

PRIMROSE CHAPEL

YEARS passed, and during them many important things happened. Governments went out, and governments came in. Halfpenny morning newspapers were established. Actors and actresses gained and lost reputations. Wars were declared, battles fought, and peaces arranged. New books were published, and old sermons preached. Marriages, births, and deaths took place in the families of kings and company promoters.

Powell and Brown knew nothing of these things. They were shut off from the world by warders and prison walls. Every morning at five o'clock the great bell clanged, and they rose and dressed themselves in badly-fitting yellow garments. All day they worked in silence, with brief intervals for particularly plain meals. At nine in the evening the great bell clanged again, and they returned to their hard, cold beds.

Their existence was one long weariness, relieved only by thoughts of freedom and the jewels. With Brown these thoughts were untroubled, but with Powell they were not. The possible consequences of the difference between the two sentences persistently

obtruded themselves. Would Brown wait until both had expired, or would he dig up the jewels and fly the country immediately after his own release? Powell, relying on his sworn promise and his past subordination to himself, considered that the odds were in favour of his choosing the former alternative. Still, at the same time, he recognised that the temptations of the latter would be very strong, and fear that they might prevail caused him many sleepless nights.

They were in the same prison, and saw each other every day. Again and again Powell tried to make an opportunity for a talk with Brown, but was always foiled by the vigilance of the warders. All he could manage was to whisper a word or two when occasionally he happened to be near him, and even this was dangerous. Once, indeed, he was detected in it, and was punished with a week in the cells for breaking the rule of silence.

At the end of three or four years Brown qualified for a ticket-of-leave. He was standing in the yard with the rest of the prisoners after breakfast one morning, when he was informed of his approaching release, and told to fall out for the necessary interview with the Governor. As he did so, the others were ordered to march to their work. One did not obey.

This was Powell. He had heard what had been said to Brown, and had determined that at all costs he would give him a final caution about the jewels. Accordingly he left the ranks, and hurried towards him. But before he had taken half-a-dozen steps he was seized by a warder.

"What does this mean, Convict 99?" demanded the warder. "Go back."

"Get out!" cried Powell. "Here, Brown!"

Instead of coming to him, Brown turned and walked in the opposite direction. Powell muttered an oath, and broke away from the warder. Two more rushed up and closed with him, however, and in a few moments he was overpowered and handcuffed. As he ceased to struggle, he looked across the yard and saw Brown reach the opposite side and enter the prison buildings.

"Remember," he shouted after him, "I'll hunt you down and kill you!"

Half an hour later Brown was conducted to the Governor's room. There he received his ticket-of-leave, with instructions as to the conditions under which it would be held.

"I hope," said the Governor, when the formalities had been completed, "that in future you will keep on the right side of the law, and will forget there are such things in the world as jewels. Your behaviour here has been excellent, and before you go you will be given a little money and a letter recommending you to a Prisoners' Aid Society in London, which I would advise you to present at once."

"Thank you, sir," said Brown.

"There is another matter," continued the Governor. "It has been reported to me that on parade this morning Convict 99 attempted to assault you, and also threatened to murder you when he had the chance. What is the reason for this vindictiveness?"

"I don't know, sir," replied Brown hesitatingly, "unless—unless—"

"Well?"

"Unless," said Brown, seeing a way out of the difficulty, "it is that he doesn't like my being released before him. You remember, sir, we were both convicted for the same burglary, but got different sentences. I'm afraid he thinks it's my fault his was longer than mine."

"I understand," said the Governor coldly. "Queen's evidence business. That'll do. Good-day!"

At noon, Brown, dressed in ordinary clothes, stepped on to the platform of the country railway station near the prison. He had the letter of recommendation and the rest of his papers in one pocket, and some money and a ticket to London in another. The weather was bright and exhilarating. Just outside the station were trees in full leaf and blossom, and all around were birds flying and singing. As he walked up and down waiting for his train, he felt singularly happy and peaceful.

Unpleasant days were over, he reflected, and pleasant ones beginning. He would dig up the jewels as soon as he could make safe arrangements for their sale. What should he do with the proceeds? The sum would be large enough to make one man rich and honest, but unfortunately not three men. Should he set aside thirds for Powell and Spottem, or should he appropriate the whole himself? That was the question.

The train drew up at the platform, and he got into an empty carriage. During the journey he considered the question of the disposal of the jewels very carefully. Spottem's claims to a share were soon dismissed, on the ground that he had deserted his

brother burglars at the moment of greatest danger. Powell's claims gave more trouble. He had stolen the jewels, conceived the idea of burying them, and been punished on their account. Besides, he had uttered certain threats.

Prison life had changed Brown a good deal, and his views were bolder and more selfish than formerly. The threats did not seem to him so terrible now, especially as he knew that Powell's doings that morning would undoubtedly postpone the date of his release. Similarly, the moral arguments did not seem to him so strong. After all, he reasoned, it was every man for himself in this world. Why should he not take advantage of the opportunity? Probably Powell would, if the positions were reversed.

As the train arrived at the London terminus, he definitely made up his mind. He would appropriate the whole amount the jewels realised, and would retire with it to America. There he would be safe from Powell and Spottem.

"That's settled," he muttered, opening the carriage door. "And now for a good blow-out. Steak and onions, and a pint of bitter. You'll like that, my boy better than bread and skilly."

He entered a coffee shop near the station, sat down, and gave the waitress his order. When she had gone, he examined himself in a mirror which was hanging on the wall. There was nothing in his appearance, he decided, to suggest that he had been a convict. He looked an ordinary respectable citizen. His hair was a trifle short, but not noticeably so, his release having fortunately happened just before the prison hair-cutting day.

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The waitress brought the steak, the onions, and the bitter beer, and he disposed of them with rare enjoyment.

"Sweets, sir?" she inquired, as he finished. "Jam roll's on."

"I'll have some," he said, with a happy smile. "As near the middle as possible, please."

"Baked or boiled, sir?"

"Baked or boiled?" he repeated, with another happy smile. "Both; I'm very fond of jam roll, and it's a long time since I've had any."

When he had eaten the two pieces, he paid his bill and walked out. At a tobacconist's shop next door he purchased some tobacco and a pipe; then, keeping on the sunny side and smoking slowly, he sauntered along to one of the parks. There he lay down in a quiet grassy corner, and went to sleep.

At about seven o'clock he awoke from a dream in which he had dug up the jewels, sold them, gone to the United States, prospered exceedingly, and become President. He lit his pipe, and reviewed the dream.

"Might come true; you never know," he commented. "Better not dig the jewels up yet, though. The police may have their eye on me. Besides, I'm not quite sure who's the best dealer to go to. Yes, I'll leave them for a bit. But I may as well have a look at the field now. That won't do any harm."

He rose and walked to another railway terminus. There he booked to a station which lay on the main road a mile from the side turning he, Powell, and Spotten had taken on the night of the burglary, and which was, he believed, the nearest to the burial-place. He reached it at dusk.

"Twenty minutes' walk," he said, as he started along the main road. "It'll be dark by then."

He proceeded leisurely, and in due course came to the side turning. At the corner he paused in perplexity. As far down as he could see were houses and gas-lamps, instead of the hedges and open country he remembered.

"I can't understand this," he muttered. "Is it the right road? It must be. There's that other one opposite, and there's that sign-post. Yes, it's the right road. What on earth has happened, though?"

The explanation was simple. Soon after the time of the burglary a railway station had been placed in the district. This at once changed its character. Speculative builders bought or leased land in every direction. Surveyors, bricklayers, clerks of works, painters, and glaziers gathered together. New roads were cut, and hundreds of houses erected. In short, the district had now become a residential suburb, with the side turning as one of the principal thoroughfares.

"The field!" exclaimed Brown, beginning to understand. "Has that escaped? Oh! it must have, it must have!"

"What say, guv'nor?"

The question was asked by an old labourer, who had come up behind him and heard him speak.

"Nothing," replied Brown, in confusion. "I've got a habit of thinking aloud. That's all."

"Right," said the labourer, going on down the turning. "No 'arm done."

"But look here," said Brown, walking with him, "I'm a bit out of my bearings, and perhaps you can help me. Do you know this part well?"

"Knowed it fur sixty year. Born and growed in it, I was. Knowed it when there wasn't a 'ouse fur 'arf a mile."

"Then," said Brown eagerly, "you can tell me how much has been built on?"

"'Course I can," said the labourer, surprised at his manner. "But why do yer ask?"

"No reason in particular," replied Brown, assuming an indifference he was far from feeling. "I used to come here a lot at one time, and I'm wondering if my old walks have disappeared. For instance, there was a path farther along on this side."

"I recollects it. Led up to Kemp's farm."

"I don't remember where it led, but it went past a little wood and then a long narrow field."

"That's it. Old Spinney and Tongue Field. I'd like to 'ave a pot of ale fur ev'ry day I've been by 'em."

"Are they still there?" asked Brown anxiously.

The labourer shook his head.

"Ouses over both," he said. "Mr. Zachariah Goodman built on 'em two or three year ago. The second turn goes up where they used to be. Yes, there's been a deal of alteration in this part. I'm afeard you won't meet many of them old walks as you was speaking of."

Brown felt faint and ill. His hopes and dreams had proved vain. How could he now find the burial-place? Alas! the jewels were hidden from him for all time. He would never dig them up, never sell them at a big price, never go to the United States, and never become President.

"Hullo, guv'nor, you looks queer," said the

labourer, noticing that he was very pale. "Maybe you've been walking too far. Why not 'ave a rest and a drop of something in 'The Three Crowns' 'ere? I'm going in."

Brown nodded, and led the way into the public-house to which they had come. There he ordered a pint of beer for the labourer and sixpennyworth of brandy for himself. When he had drunk the brandy, he felt a little better.

"Which turning did you say it was that runs that way?" he asked abruptly.

"What way?" asked the labourer, who had forgotten his recent remark on the subject.

"Where the Tongue Field used to be."

"Oh, there! The second on this side. Yes, that goes up somewhere about the place."

"Thanks. Good-night!"

With these words Brown went out. After he had gone the labourer puzzled for a few moments over the interest shown in the changes in the district, and then dismissed the matter in favour of some more beer.

"It's a regular funeral, that's what it is," said Brown, as he walked on. "I might just as well go back as not."

Still, in spite of these pessimistic observations, he took the second turning, and followed it for some distance, and even made excursions into several roads leading from it. He was searching for the curiously shaped tree. There seemed to him to be a chance that it might have been left. If so, he would count the twenty steps due north from it, and ascertain under what house or garden the jewels were. Then

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he would endeavour to make some mutually satisfactory arrangement with the owner.

At last he found the tree. It stood on a piece of ground at the side of a large building. He came upon it suddenly on rounding a corner. It had grown taller and fuller, but he entertained no doubt as to its identity. There was the trunk, whole for a little way, and then split into parts, and then whole again. The openings were as distinct as when he saw them before. A gas-lamp at the corner shone down on them, with a fantastic throw of shadows beyond. As he looked, he was reminded of Powell's simile of the two great eyes.

"That's it, right enough," he muttered excitedly. "Now which is north? Let me see. If this is east and this west, that must be north. Twenty steps—yes, the jewels are under the house. But is it a house? It's very big for one. Surely, surely it can't be a church or a chapel? That would be too terrible."

He hurried to the front of the building. Some railings divided it from the road, and on a board attached to them was painted in gilt letters :

PRIMROSE CHAPEL.

Minister: The Rev. MARMADUKE MOON, M.A.

Brown read this, and then leaned against the railings, and hid his face in his hands. The discovery of the tree had given him fresh hopes, but the knowledge of the nature of the building had driven them out violently. With a private individual he could have made an agreement to dig up and share the jewels,

but with a body of chapel trustees this would be impossible. And so he stood, his body bowed and his face covered, a picture of utter despair.

Presently a little old gentleman, wearing a large-crowned silk hat and a full-bottomed frock coat, came round the corner and noticed the picture. He stopped, and after a moment's hesitation, put a hand on Brown's shoulder, and said :

“What's the matter? What's the matter?”

Brown started away from him and said surlily :

“That's my affair.”

“And mine too,” continued the old gentleman cheerfully. “You're in trouble, and I want to help you.”

Brown looked at him more closely, and judged from his long white beard and benevolent expression that he meant what he said.

“Yes, I'm in trouble,” he remarked, with a sigh. “But no one can get me out of it.”

“Nonsense, nonsense! I'm Mr. Zachariah Goodman, chief deacon of this chapel. I won't leave you in this state, at my very door, so to speak. It's my duty to help you, and I'm going to.”

“Excuse me,” said Brown, remembering what the labourer had told him, “but I've heard of a Mr. Zachariah Goodman, who's a builder. Are you the one?”

“I am,” replied the old gentleman, evidently pleased at his name being recognised. “Most of the houses just about here were erected by me. So was this chapel. A fine building, though I say it. Yes, a very fine building.”

He turned and gazed at it with admiration. Brown

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thought rapidly. This was the man who had deprived him of the jewels. Should he knock him down in revenge and bolt? No. To do so would be not only cowardly, but unreasonable. After all, if he hadn't built on the spot, someone else would have. Should he accept his offer of help? An acquaintanceship with him might be a step towards the recovery of the jewels. Through it he would be able to obtain access to the chapel, and then—yes, he would accept the offer.

"Well, what's the matter?" asked Mr. Goodman, facing him again. "Better tell me."

Brown hesitated. He dared not give the true reason for his despondency, and could not hit upon a plausible false one.

"You've done something wrong, and are sorry?" suggested Mr. Goodman. "If that's it, don't be afraid. I shall think none the worse of you."

Brown perceived that the part of repentant sinner might serve well, and proceeded to play it.

"Yes, that's about it," he said, speaking in a whisper for fear someone might pass. "I was once a burglar; but, in heart at any rate, I am one no longer. About four years ago I was arrested by the police and sentenced to penal servitude. While in prison I thought over my past career, and realised how wicked it had been, and determined to be strictly honest and respectable in the future. I came out on ticket-of-leave early this morning with this determination as a sort of guiding star."

"Bravo!" interjected Mr. Goodman. "Bravo!"

"For hours I tried hard to get work," continued Brown; "but, alas! I met with nothing but rebuffs.

Directly people heard I'd been in prison they called me gaol-bird and ordered me away. When evening came I stopped trying, and walked out here so as to be quiet and to consider my future. And somehow it seemed so hopeless that I quite broke down. And when you spoke to me I was feeling alone in the world, and was wishing I was dead almost."

"My poor, dear fellow, don't talk like that," said Mr. Goodman. "You are not alone in the world. I am your friend. Cheer up! I am going to give you a fresh start in life."

"Thank you, sir; thank you," murmured Brown. "I don't know why you should be so good."

"Nonsense, nonsense!" exclaimed Mr. Goodman, taking his arm. "I am simply doing my duty. I find you outside my own chapel a poor, chastened burglar. Providence has sent you here, and Providence bids me help you. I mean to do so. Come home with me. We will have some supper, and afterwards discuss your future."

They walked up the road together. Brown was happy. He was again hopeful of obtaining the jewels. Besides, he was proud of the effective way in which he had just acted. In the old days he had been overshadowed by his two companions, and had merely done what they had told him. Now he had proved himself capable of original work. Neither Powell nor Spottem could, in fact, have managed things better.

CHAPTER V

AN ESCAPE FROM PRISON

MR. GOODMAN stopped at a small villa, two or three hundred yards from Primrose Chapel.

"Here we are," he said, producing a latch-key, and opening the door. "A bachelor's establishment: myself and Mrs. Kronk, my housekeeper. She is out visiting this evening, and we shall have it all to ourselves. Come in, my friend. This way. Hang your hat on the stand."

"Thank you, sir," said Brown.

"Sit down," continued Mr. Goodman, ushering him into a back parlour. "I will get some supper ready while you rest. That running about trying to get work must have made you tired and hungry."

He proceeded to lay the table, explaining as he did so that he had had a housekeeper during recent years only, and that previously he had been in the habit of waiting on himself.

"Draw up," he said, as he finished. "Cold beef, pickles, cheese, and ale. Best supper in the world. Hope you'll do it justice."

When they had eaten and drunk, they went into another room in the front of the house. A fire was

burning, although the evening was fairly warm. They sat on either side of it, facing each other.

"Do you smoke?" asked Mr. Goodman, taking a tobacco jar from the mantelpiece.

"Yes, thanks," replied Brown.

"Help yourself. Many deacons don't believe in smoking; but I do. It makes people kind and sociable, and that's a long way towards making them religious."

They filled their pipes from the jar, and lit them, Mr. Goodman leaned back, and regarded Brown contemplatively.

"To think of your having been a burglar," he observed, after a short silence. "I can hardly believe it. Why, you look as respectable as I do."

"I assure you I was one," said Brown, a little offended at his claims to wickedness being disputed. "Here's my ticket-of-leave."

Mr. Goodman glanced at it, and then said:

"I didn't doubt your word. What I meant was that you're the first burglar I've met, and that you're not the dreadfully debased person I supposed one to be. But so much the better. Your appearance will not be against you in a new walk in life."

"No," said Brown, with an appreciative smile, "I don't think it will."

"But what is this new walk to be? We've got to settle that. You talk like a man who has had a good education, and been in educated society. What were you before you became a burglar?"

"A confidential clerk in the City; used to look after the petty cash and the correspondence."

"Good! And why did you give it up?"

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Brown moved uneasily in his chair, but did not speak.

"I understand. The road so many young men in London travel. Horse-racing; appropriation of the petty cash; discovery. That was it, of course?"

"It was," admitted Brown.

Mr. Goodman gazed into the fire meditatively.

"I have often felt the need of a confidential clerk," he soliloquised. "I am getting old, and am not so energetic as I was. Besides, the chapel takes a lot of my time. It looks like a dispensation of Providence, but—yes, there is the but."

"Give me the chance," put in Brown, interpreting his meaning. "You'd never regret it, sir. I've done with horse-racing, and betting, and everything of that sort. I assure you I have."

"You mean that?"

"I do. I've turned over a new leaf. You'd find me absolutely trustworthy. Please, please give me the chance!"

Mr. Goodman hesitated for a moment or two longer, and then made up his mind.

"I had other plans for your future," he said heartily. "However, I will try you as my confidential clerk. Let me see; to-day is Saturday. Meet me at my offices in the High Street on Monday morning."

"I am very grateful."

"You will prove that by working hard. And now, my friend, have you lodgings?"

"No, but I can get some."

"I'm afraid it's too late to-night. You might stop here till Monday. Mrs. Kronk always has a

spare bedroom ready. Yes, that's the best arrangement. Stop here. To-morrow you could accompany me to Primrose Chapel."

"I should like to," said Brown, thinking of the jewels. "I believe association with it would help me a lot."

"And so do I," said Mr. Goodman delightedly. "You would hear plain discourse, and meet honest and right living people. Primrose Chapel is, in fact, just the place to keep you straight."

"What is its denomination?" asked Brown, anxious to learn as much about it as possible.

"I am proud to say that it is undenominational. The members belong to no sect, and recognise no stereotyped forms and ceremonies. They are neither Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, nor Wesleyans. The Bible, and only the Bible, is their profession. They stand quite by themselves, a simple community, believing and endeavouring to act up to their beliefs."

Mr. Goodman rolled out this in a ready, emphatic manner, which suggested that he had it by heart, and valued it greatly. Brown realised that an appreciative comment would be advisable, and said :

"It seems an ideal chapel."

"The very word! Ideal, without doubt, ideal!" exclaimed Mr. Goodman. "Some years ago I became dissatisfied with the chapels I saw around me. One was too narrow in its views; another was too broad. One hadn't enough life; another had more than enough, but unfortunately of the wrong kind. All suffered from tradition or outside control. Nowhere could I find just what I thought a chapel should be.

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Not finding, I decided to create. Business had been prospering with me, and my means considerably exceeded my needs. I used the surplus in building and starting Primrose Chapel. It is my ideal of a chapel. In some respects, such as government by a minister and deacons, it resembles the general run. But in others it differs from them altogether. For instance, it is self-contained, recognising no union, synod, or similar earthly authority. Also, there are no pew rents, a weekly offering being taken instead."

Brown listened to the first part of this speech, but not to the last. A fresh doubt as to the jewels disturbed him. Were they in truth under the chapel? Or had they been found by some workman when its foundations were laid? He rapidly calculated the distance he and Powell had placed them below the level of the field. The ditch was about four feet in depth, and the hole about six feet more. Total, ten feet. Did the foundations go down so far? He must ascertain that.

"I am wearying you," said Mr. Goodman, noticing his abstracted air. "I'm afraid I talk too much about my chapel. I forget that it doesn't interest everybody."

"It interests me," said Brown, rousing himself to action. "I was just thinking what a fine, substantial-looking building it is."

"Yes, it'll last a few years longer than either of us. Best bricks and mortar, and strong foundations."

Brown saw that he had the opening he wanted.

"I suppose," he said, hiding his anxiety with an effort, "the foundations of a building like that

are the most important part. About how deep are they dug?"

"Oh, seven or eight feet."

"Never more?"

"Possibly nine in exceptionally soft soil. But why do you ask?"

"No particular reason," said Brown, in embarrassment. "I thought that perhaps—"

"Well?"

"That perhaps," he continued desperately, "if they were dug very deep Roman remains, or treasure, or things of that sort, might be found."

Mr. Goodman laughed, and said :

"We builders don't make our money that way. I've been in the business forty years, but I've seen nothing in the Roman remains or treasure line. Old tins and bottles, that's all."

He laughed again. This time Brown, who was convinced that the jewels had not been disturbed, joined in heartily. Then, to change the subject, he said :

"It was a silly idea. I don't know how it came into my head. Please go on telling me about the chapel. I am really interested. Who is the minister? What is he like?"

"The Rev. Marmaduke Moon," replied Mr. Goodman. "He's an M.A., and that's a lot in his favour. He's a fluent preacher, too, with a nice easy style of delivery. Unfortunately, there's something to be said against him, though. He has just published a novel, and he purposes writing another."

"You don't approve of novels?"

"I do not. Very few are edifying. The majority

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only waste the time and addle the brains of the people who read them. I haven't seen Mr. Moon's yet, and for all I know, it may be an edifying one. But even if it is, I am grieved. A minister should devote himself to his flock, and leave novel-writing alone. No man can serve two masters."

There was the sound of the street door being opened. Brown glanced in its direction.

"It's Mrs. Kronk, my housekeeper," said Mr. Goodman. "She'll probably come in here presently. You'll find her very estimable, though, perhaps, a trifle distant at first. She's the widow of a minister under whom I once sat. He was the most conscientious man I've seen, and she is the most conscientious woman. Her perception of right and wrong is acute, wonderfully acute."

"Hadn't I better go?" asked Brown. "She won't like to meet a burglar."

"Nonsense, nonsense! You're not that now. Let me see, my friend, what's your name? I don't think you told me."

"James Brown."

"Ah, yes! I remember seeing it on the ticket-of-leave. Well, I shall introduce you to her as Mr. James Brown, my confidential clerk, and I shall say nothing to her or anybody else about your past."

"It's very kind of you."

"Simply my duty. You shall have a fair chance in your new career. No one shall know you've been a burglar, and thus no one will be able to point the finger of scorn at you. Ah! here is Mrs. Kronk."

A tall, thin woman, carrying a newspaper and a work-basket, entered the room. Her age was about

forty, but spectacles and a widow's cap gave her a somewhat older appearance. She laid down the paper and basket, and looked at Mr. Goodman inquiringly.

"Back again!" he said cheerily. "Hope you've had a pleasant evening. This is Mr. Brown, my confidential clerk! Mr. Brown—Mrs. Kronk."

Brown placed his pipe on a Bible which lay on the table, and then stood up and bowed. Mrs. Kronk acknowledged the bow with a slight nod, and said:

"I was not aware, Mr. Goodman, that you proposed to engage a confidential clerk."

"It was a sudden step. Mr. Brown offered me his services to-day, and I accepted them. I am beginning to feel the strain of business affairs, and he will relieve me considerably. But don't stand, Mrs. Kronk. Take this chair by the fire."

"Thanks! I prefer this one."

She sat at the opposite side of the table. As she did so, she noticed Brown's pipe lying on the Bible. She eyed it indignantly, and pointing to it with her finger, said to him:

"Is that your pipe, young man?"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied.

"Then oblige me by removing it at once," she demanded sternly. "Nothing should be placed upon the Holy Book."

"I'm very sorry," he said, obeying her. "I didn't see what it was."

"I repeat," she said, with a sniff, "nothing should be placed upon the Holy Book. Ignorance is not innocence."

Having thus declared war, she produced some

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work from her basket and began to sew. For a time the three sat in silence. Then Mr. Goodman, who was very much distressed by what had occurred, endeavoured to start a general friendly conversation. His remarks were dully received by both the others, and in despair he picked up the newspaper Mrs. Kronk had brought in, and said to Brown :

“Would you like to look at this?”

“Thank you,” replied Brown, “I would.”

He opened the paper, which was a late evening one, and held it between himself and Mrs. Kronk. She had cast several searching glances at him, and he was foolishly fearful that her eyes might penetrate to the ticket-of-leave in his pocket. The paper was not much protection against them, but it was better than nothing.

He ran down a couple of columns, without finding anything particularly interesting. They contained, in fact, merely news that he had already seen in a different form in a morning paper. The next column, however, contained something that he had not seen before—something, too, that interested him greatly. Near the top of it was this paragraph :

“DARING ESCAPE OF A CONVICT.—Early this afternoon a convict named Dick Powell escaped from Braham Prison in a sensational manner. It appears that he had been sentenced to solitary confinement for an offence against discipline, and was visited in his cell by the chaplain. In some way or other he compelled the chaplain to change clothes with him, and then gagged and bound him, and walked out in his place. The two are of about the same build and

complexion, and Powell succeeded in passing the prison gate without being detected. Soon afterwards, however, a warder entered the cell and discovered the position of affairs. A pursuit was at once organised, and Powell tracked to the woods near Braham. A systematic search is now being made in them ; but the result is doubtful, owing to their extent and wild character. Should Powell get clear, he will probably make for London, where it is understood he has friends."

He read it breathlessly, read it again with deliberation, and then leaned back in his chair and sighed. He had kept the paper close about his face, and neither Mr. Goodman nor Mrs. Kronk had seen the involuntary change of expression which told of his emotion at the news. But both heard the sigh.

"What's the matter ?" asked Mr. Goodman.

Brown laid down the paper. He had got over the first shock, and was able to resume his ordinary expression.

"Nothing," he replied, "except that I'm a little tired."

"Of course you are," said Mr. Goodman. "I ought to have remembered that you've had a heavy day. We'll see about bed at once. Eleven has struck, and it's quite time. Mrs. Kronk, I have invited Mr. Brown to stay with us till Monday, and he has accepted the invitation. Would you please show him up to the visitors' room ?"

Mrs. Kronk folded her work and put it back in the basket ; then she rose, and said :

"I trust you will not think I am exceeding my

duty, Mr. Goodman, when I suggest that you should reconsider this invitation."

"My dear woman, there's no other house in the neighbourhood where he can stay, and the last train to town has gone."

"He could walk. He seems pretty strong and active."

"Nonsense, nonsense!"

"It is not nonsense, Mr. Goodman. It is sound reasoning."

"Well, at any rate, please oblige me by showing him upstairs. I really must insist. We'll talk about the matter afterwards if you like. Good-night, Mr. Brown! I am sorry there has been this unpleasantness."

"Don't mention it," said Brown. "Good-night, sir!"

"I can only wish, Mr. Goodman, that you may not have cause to regret this at some future period," said Mrs. Kronk. "Come on, young man!"

She left the room, and Brown, who was anxious to be alone to consider the new situation created by the escape of Powell, at once followed. After they had gone, Mr. Goodman lit his pipe and thought over the events of the last hour or two. He was willing to admit that he had acted a little impulsively; but that did not excuse Mrs. Kronk's unceremonious protest. She ought to have been more accommodating. Things would probably turn out all right. Brown looked like a man who could be honest if he tried. Besides, he had expressed a keen interest in Primrose Chapel, and that was a very favourable sign.

The return of Mrs. Kronk interrupted his thoughts. She closed the door behind her, and said :

"I have carried out your request with regard to the young man."

"I don't know," said Mr. Goodman testily, "why you persist in calling him 'young man.' He's almost as old as you are."

"It doesn't matter what I call him," she retorted. "What does matter is that he's another of those people who impose on your benevolence. Again and again this sort of thing happens. I've refrained from serious remonstrance on previous occasions, but on this I positively cannot. Confidential clerk, indeed!"

Mr. Goodman was silent for some moments. Then, in agitated tones, he remarked :

"I admit I've made mistakes in the past. But I hope—nay, I believe—that I'm right about Mr. Brown. The circumstances in his case are really very exceptional."

"They had need be for you to make him your confidential clerk. How did you meet him? Who is he? What has he been?"

"I can't tell you, Mrs. Kronk, and you oughtn't to ask me to. You know I always respect the confessions of the people I am privileged to help."

"Privileged fiddlesticks! The last person you brought home with you went off in the night with some silver things; and I expect this one will try to do the same, confession or no confession."

"I don't think he will," said Mr. Goodman, showing some distress, "I really don't."

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"Well, if he does try, he won't succeed so easily as the other did," concluded Mrs. Kronk, with a sardonic smile. "I've locked him in his room, and put the water-butt under his window."

CHAPTER VI

A NEW USE FOR A MEAT CHOPPER

BROWN heard Mrs. Kronk turn the key in the door, but felt no particular emotion on that account. His prison life had accustomed him to being locked in, and, besides, he had no intention of leaving in the night.

Sitting on the side of the bed, he began to think of Powell and the jewels. The situation seemed to him very serious. As the newspaper suggested, if Powell got clear he would make for London. Then he would come to this part, and discover the curiously-shaped tree. And then there were many possibilities, for Powell was both resourceful and daring.

What was to be done? For long he tried to hit upon a plan. Not succeeding, he at last lay down and went to sleep. Throughout the night he was disturbed by dreams, in which he, Powell, Mrs. Kronk, and Mr. Goodman figured. A dozen times one of the four obtained the jewels in some strange way, and strove to keep the others from sharing in them. Once, at such a moment, Spottem also appeared upon the scene, and, after an angry discussion, handcuffed all four together and marched them to a police station.

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He was awakened in the morning by a single heavy knock. He started up and cried "Yes?"

"It is eight o'clock, young man," came the reply, in Mrs. Kronk's voice, "and this house breakfasts at half-past."

"Thanks, ma'am. I'll be there."

Mrs. Kronk unlocked the door and went away. Immediately she had gone, Brown jumped out of bed and proceeded to wash and dress. The morning was bright and fresh, and under its influence he took a less despondent view of the situation. After all, Powell might not get to London, and even if he did, might not discover the tree.

When he was ready, he went downstairs. Mr. Goodman met him in the hall, greeted him warmly, and conducted him into a room where breakfast was laid. Presently Mrs. Kronk joined them. She and Mr. Goodman sat at opposite ends of the table, and Brown between them.

Again Mr. Goodman endeavoured to start a general friendly conversation, but again he failed. Mrs. Kronk was disappointed that Brown had not dropped out of his window into the water-butt during the night, and eyed him with increased resentment. This reduced him to a dull silence, and the conversation became simply a series of monologues by Mr. Goodman, with interruptions by Mrs. Kronk.

After breakfast, however, she withdrew. The two men lit their pipes, and Brown was soon at his ease and able to respond to Mr. Goodman intelligently. For some time they sat, peacefully discussing theological and other Sunday subjects. Then, as the

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clock on the mantelpiece chimed for half-past ten, Mr. Goodman jumped up.

"And now for Primrose Chapel," he said. "I consider it my duty as chief deacon to be there well before the rest of the congregation. You are coming with me?"

"Yes, thank you," replied Brown.

They put on their hats and walked round to the chapel. It was open, but empty.

"Sit down somewhere, my friend," said Mr. Goodman as they entered. "I shall be back in five minutes. I'm going through to the vestry."

Brown looked about him. The building was fairly large, but without gallery accommodation. There were two aisles running up it, with long pews joining them, and short ones between them and the walls. A pulpit was at the far end, and above it was a small organ. Architecturally, in fact, Primrose Chapel was very like many other chapels.

As Mr. Goodman disappeared behind a door near the pulpit, an idea occurred to Brown. He thought over it for a moment or two, and then went out into the ground surrounding the chapel. Turning the corner, he reached the curiously-shaped tree. A weathercock on the roof showed that the chapel was built due east and west, and that a line drawn north from the tree would cut across it at right angles. Imagining such a line, he followed it to the wall, and noted the number of his steps.

Entering the chapel again, he walked up it until, by means of the windows, he ascertained that he was opposite the tree. Then, starting from the wall, and allowing for its thickness, he continued along the

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imaginary line north until he had brought the total number of steps up to twenty. The last one touched the floor just by the corner of a pew. Sitting down in it, he muttered :

"Twenty steps due north. I'm right over the jewels now, and that's something."

A minute later Mr. Goodman returned.

"I see you've found a seat," he said, coming up to Brown. "But wouldn't you like to be nearer the front?"

"No, thanks! I always like to be about this distance from the pulpit. May I stay here?"

"Certainly you may," replied Mr. Goodman. "The seat belongs to nobody in particular, and you won't be disturbed. I must leave you now. Meet me outside after the service."

He hurried away to the door, to be ready to greet the members of the congregation. Brown settled himself comfortably. The jewels might never be his, but it was pleasant to reflect that he was so near to them.

At first slowly, and then in quick succession, people arrived and sat in different parts of the building. Brown judged from their appearance that most came from the small villas and shops he had noticed in the immediate neighbourhood, and the remainder from labourers' cottages farther off. They did not interest him greatly. He felt that, so far as his purposes were concerned, only the heads of the chapel mattered.

Just before eleven the organ sounded, and at the same moment the Rev. Marmaduke Moon entered. He was a short, chubby man of about thirty, with

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oily black hair and a curled moustache, and an expression which spoke of extreme self-satisfaction and little else. Brown watched him ascend the pulpit stairs, and then turned his eyes to the organ. The player was a woman. This surprised him, for all other organists he had seen had been men.

The service began. There was little difference between it and those at ordinary denominational places of worship. Hymns, prayers, and readings from the Scriptures, with a sermon, an anthem, and a collection, made it up. Brown behaved decorously throughout. Mr. Goodman, who was seated near, glanced at him from time to time, and was satisfied. The gravity of Brown's face during the sermon particularly pleased him. It was due, however, to thoughts of Powell and the jewels, and not to anything said by Mr. Moon.

At the end of the service Brown met Mr. Goodman in the road outside, as they had arranged. Some members of the congregation were also standing there, and Mr. Goodman introduced him to two of them. One was Miss Minerva Grass, the organist. She was a thin, pale young woman, with sharp plain features and a somewhat masculine style of dress. The other was Miss Daisy Summers. Like Miss Grass, she was young, but, unlike her, she was plump and pretty, and becomingly dressed. While they were with these two, Mr. Moon came out and joined the group. Mr. Goodman again introduced Brown, and then, after reminding the others that he expected them all to tea that day, took his arm and walked away with him.

"Yes," he said, when they had gone a few yards,

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"we are to have company. Not many, though. Just those three: Mr. Moon, Miss Summers, and Miss Grass. How do you like them?"

"Very much," replied Brown. "But isn't it unusual to have a lady organist at a chapel?"

"Perhaps. Still, personally, I don't see any objection. I admit I appointed Miss Grass because she pressed me to; but she's a good player all the same. Besides, she's a great admirer of Mr. Moon, which is a special recommendation. I wish certain other people were like her in that respect. Miss Summers, our chapel keeper, for instance."

"Miss Summers a chapel keeper!" exclaimed Brown, in astonishment. "Surely not. She's too young, and pretty, and everything else, to be one."

"Nonsense, nonsense!"

"They're faded elderly persons, as a rule," persisted Brown.

"I know they are. But I prefer Miss Summers. Cheerful appearance; up-to-date ideas about storing hymn-books, and decorating Sunday School walls; proper sense of the importance of her position and duties."

"But—"

"Please say no more," interrupted Mr. Goodman, with a smile. "Miss Summers is a friend of mine, and it isn't her fault if she's young and pretty. She doesn't quite admire Mr. Moon, and that sometimes causes friction. But otherwise she's a splendid chapel keeper. Ah, here we are at home again!"

Brown nodded, and began another subject of conversation as they entered the house. During dinner,

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which was served on their arrival, Mrs. Kronk carefully maintained her attitude of distrust. Afterwards Mr. Goodman rescued Brown from her by taking him to the Primrose Sunday School. When they returned, they were accompanied by Mr. Moon, Miss Summers, and Miss Grass.

Mrs. Kronk received them with severe politeness. Tea was ready, and the party at once sat down. The arrangement of places at the table suited Brown. On one side were he and Miss Summers, who seemed to him by far the nicest woman in the room ; on the other were Mr. Moon and Miss Grass ; and at the ends were Mr. Goodman and Mrs. Kronk.

"I hope you all liked my sermon this morning," said Mr. Moon, after some general talk.

"It was well meant and suggestive," observed Mr. Goodman, in a non-committal manner.

"It was more than that," said Miss Grass fervently ; "it was eloquent, majestic, musical, imaginative. While listening to it, I was lifted right above this commonplace world. I have not been so moved by anything for a very long time. If I had to describe it in one word, that word would be 'great.' "

Mrs. Kronk looked strong disapproval. Miss Summers smiled. Mr. Moon helped himself to some jam, and said :

"Thank you, Miss Grass, thank you ! I was painfully conscious that the Primrose people as a body were not up to my finer passages, and it is a relief to me to learn that even one properly understood and appreciated. I would not myself pronounce the sermon great, for I do not think the preacher of a sermon should express so decided an opinion as to its

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merits; but I am glad that it seemed great to you."

Both Mr. Goodman and Mrs. Kronk were on the point of speaking. Miss Summers forestalled them, however.

"Oh, Mr. Moon, Mr. Moon, it's really too bad of you!" she said, with a laugh. "As a body not up to your finer passages! Miss Grass a single shining exception! What about the rest of us here who were present? Do—oh, do!—admit some more exceptions! Mr. Brown, I appeal to you. Wasn't your intellect equal to the demands made upon it by Mr. Moon? Don't you think mine was?"

Brown hesitated. He wished to answer in the affirmative, but feared that it would not be policy to do so.

"Quick!" she continued, with another laugh. "Was this great sermon above us, or was it not?"

"Miss Summers, your words do not please me," said Mr. Moon, in dignified tones. "There are some things which may, and perhaps should, be treated in this manner. Sermons, however, are different. To speak of one frivolously or disrespectfully, especially when in the company of the preacher, is conduct of which I am sorry any member of my congregation should be guilty."

"You're taking too extreme a view," interposed Mr. Goodman. "I'm sure she didn't intend that."

"As for me," added Mrs. Kronk tartly, "I agree with her. She only stood up for the intelligence of the members of Primrose Chapel, and I should have done so myself if she hadn't. No minister should

underrate his congregation. My late lamented husband was one, and he never did."

"I must confess that I am hurt at the tenor of this conversation," said Mr. Moon, in still more dignified tones. "Perhaps it would be well that I should point out before it goes any farther that some deference is due to my office, if not to me personally."

"Certainly there is!" exclaimed Miss Grass. "I am surprised at your presuming like this, Miss Summers, and at your supporting her, Mrs. Kronk. I can hardly sit still, I feel so indignant."

"Young lady—" began Mrs. Kronk.

"Miss Grass—" began Miss Summers.

"Please let the matter end here," broke in Mr. Goodman. "We all respect you, Mr. Moon, and none of us would wilfully offend you. It's simply a misunderstanding. I'm distressed, deeply distressed, that it should have occurred."

Miss Summers saw that he spoke in earnest, and pitying him, decided to help to restore peace.

"Yes, it's simply a misunderstanding," she said impetuously. "I am very sorry if I caused it, Mr. Moon. Will you forgive me? Of course you will. Such things are bound to happen sometimes. And now, Mr. Moon, that you've forgiven me, you deserve a piece of cake. May I pass you some?"

"Thank you, yes," he replied graciously. "The sultana kind."

After this the conversation ran somewhat more pleasantly. Brown did not join in it, for he was again thinking of Powell. Twenty-four hours had passed since his escape, and danger from him might be very near. He would not venture to use the

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railway, but it would not take him long to walk to London. At the end of another twenty-four hours he might arrive, discover the curiously-shaped tree, and make an attempt on the jewels.

Now and then bits of the conversation reached Brown, in spite of his abstraction. He heard Mr. Moon announce that he had just had his photograph taken, and proposed to offer enlargements of it to the congregation—seven shillings and sixpence framed, five shillings unframed. He heard Miss Grass speak in adoring terms of Mr. Moon's novel, and Mr. Goodman express doubt as to whether the writing of it was consistent with Mr. Moon's ministerial duties. And then he heard something which interested him far more, and made him sit up, alert and eager.

"The chapel's unquestionably a fine building," remarked Mrs. Kronk, apparently in reply to Mr. Goodman; "but, as I've often told you before, the full effect of it is spoiled by that three-legged tree on the right."

This was what Brown heard, and it suggested to him a way out of the Powell difficulty. He listened intently to what followed.

"Yes, I know that's your view," said Mr. Goodman, "and sometimes I'm inclined to agree with it. The tree is certainly not beautiful."

"Its own mother could hardly call it that," put in Miss Summers.

"My advice is, cut it down," said Mrs. Kronk, ignoring the interruption.

"I hesitate to do that," said Mr. Goodman. "We might feel afterwards that we had misjudged it, and

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that it had really been an embellishment. It's easy to cut down a tree, but not easy to stick it up again."

"What do you think, Mr. Moon?" asked Mrs. Kronk.

"I'm afraid I haven't given the matter very much consideration," he replied. "Still there's no doubt that it's ugly, and also that at the rate it's growing it'll soon make the chapel look small in comparison. Better get rid of it, perhaps."

"Yes, better get rid of it," echoed Miss Grass.

"A difficulty," mused Mr. Goodman, "is that we're all so used to seeing the two together, that we can't exactly tell how the one affects the other. The opinion of a stranger would be very valuable."

Brown saw that the moment had come for him to speak. If the tree were removed, the secret of the burial-place of the jewels would be his alone, and Powell would have escaped from prison in vain. Suppressing his excitement, he said abruptly:

"I'm a stranger."

"Of course you are; I was forgetting," said Mr. Goodman. "If you've noticed the tree, your opinion is just what we want. Have you?"

"Yes, I've noticed it," said Brown, collecting his energies for a great effort, "and my opinion is that it ought not to be left standing another day. It's terribly ugly. I wonder it hasn't frightened some of those dear little Sunday School children out of their senses before now. It's the sort of tree heathens make a fetish of. You might as well have a graven image on the property, or one of those animals that used to be worshipped in ancient times."

All the others, excepting Miss Summers, seemed impressed. She laughed and said :

"I like that animal idea. Suppose we exchange the tree for a sacred crocodile? It would look well in a tank outside Primrose Chapel."

"Hush, Miss Summers! You really mustn't talk in this way," said Mr. Goodman; and then turning to Brown, went on : "I am obliged to you for having spoken thus plainly. My mind is now made up. You have convinced me that the tree cumbers the ground, and I will arrange for its removal at some convenient time. You quite approve, Mr. Moon?"

"Quite!"

Brown relapsed into silence. He was not satisfied with the vague reference to a convenient time. That might mean the end of the week, and Powell would probably reach London long before that. No, the tree must be cut down that very night, or at any rate, in the morning. But by whom? Anybody might do it with perseverance, for the tree was not a big one, and each division of the trunk might be attacked separately. An axe would be wanted, though. Where could one be obtained at short notice? For a few moments he considered this and other questions, and then formed a definite plan of campaign.

Presently the tea-party broke up. Afterwards Brown attended the evening service at Primrose Chapel, returned, had supper, and went to his bedroom. He did not undress, however, but sat under the gas and began to read some Sunday magazines Mr. Goodman had lent him. The plan of campaign he had formed necessitated his being up very early, and the only way he could ensure this was by not

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going to bed at all. Hour slowly followed hour, and with the help of the magazines and an occasional walk to and fro, he succeeded in keeping awake.

When it was fully dawn, he stepped to the door. Mrs. Kronk had not locked it this time, and he opened it without difficulty and crept downstairs. First he went to the kitchen and picked up an axe-shaped meat-chopper hanging there, which he had noticed on the previous day. Then he went to the street door, and drew the bolts, and let himself out with a carefulness that did credit to his training as a burglar. And then, with a look of determination on his face, and the meat-chopper under his arm, he walked towards the curiously-shaped tree.

CHAPTER VII

THE RESURRECTION OF BILL SPOTTEM

BROWN attacked the tree fiercely, and, in spite of being somewhat indifferently armed, succeeded in cutting it down. Afterwards, a little unnerved at having been nearly overwhelmed in the fall, he returned to Mr. Goodman's house. Finding him up, he told him what he had done, adding that he had been actuated solely by a desire to serve him and Primrose Chapel. Mr. Goodman thanked him heartily, and later in the morning had the tree sawn up and carted away.

The worst was over, but there remained the danger of an accidental meeting with Powell, and for a week or two Brown kept indoors as much as possible. Then he reconsidered the point. Powell had apparently not been recaptured, as the newspapers contained nothing to that effect. Still, the chances of meeting him were now slight, for probably he had visited the neighbourhood, and, not discovering the tree, had departed for good. Reasoning in this way, Brown began to move about freely.

But although he knew exactly where the jewels were buried, he did not try to dig them up. This was due to some information he had obtained about

the foundations of the chapel. Just below the wooden floor was a thick layer of concrete. The one would yield in a few minutes to ordinary tools, but the other would require special apparatus and much time. Discovery and interruption at this stage of the work seemed so likely that he could never summon courage enough to make the attempt.

At first he chafed at the inaction, but gradually became reconciled to it. After some months, indeed he almost ceased to trouble about the jewels. He still liked the idea of being near them, and regularly occupied the corner seat immediately over their burial-place. But the old eagerness for possession had gone. Perhaps they would be his some day. In the meantime, it was sufficient to feel that he alone knew where they were, and that they were as safe from other people as if in the vaults of the Bank of England or at the top of the North Pole.

A reason for this contentment was that in other respects things were going pleasantly with him. When he took up his duties in Mr. Goodman's building business, he determined to perform them well, for thus he would facilitate the attainment of his ultimate object. He was a capable clerk, and acting in this spirit, he soon proved of great use. Mr. Goodman responded generously, both by praising him and by increasing his salary. The result was that he continued to work zealously, and, as time went on, acquired so thorough a knowledge of the business that on occasion he could undertake the sole management himself. Latterly he was often called upon to do this, for Mr. Goodman was getting to be a very old man, and was again and again confined to his bed by illness.

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His chapel career was as successful as his business one. In the early days he thought the life dull, but afterwards he changed his mind. Primrose Chapel epitomised the big world. A few people who thought for themselves, and a great many who let others think for them. Love affairs, social rivalry, political and religious agreements and disagreements. Pride of birth, pride of money, pride of intellect, all playing strange antics. Selfishness and unselfishness. A little world, and on the whole not a very nice little world.

The life began to interest him, and he entered into it energetically. On and on he went. He bought a frock-coat and a silk hat ; he taught a class in the Sunday School ; he acted as honorary secretary to the Dorcas Society ; he took charge of one of the collection plates ; in time, in fact, he became one of the most prominent of the Primrose people. Mr. Goodman, with whom he had continued to reside, sought and valued his opinions on chapel matters. Even Mrs. Kronk showed him some consideration.

More than two years had passed since Brown's release from prison, when one morning Mr. Goodman handed him a letter he had just received, and said :

"Look at that. I've never before been so upset by anything."

Brown read the letter. It was from Mr. Moon, and ran :

"**MY DEAR MR. GOODMAN,**—The labour of writing my last novel, and of seeing it safely through the press, has overtaxed me sadly, and I feel I owe it to myself and the public to take a couple of months' holiday in some restful place, and am accordingly

leaving for Paris to-night. With respect to my pulpit, I have arranged that it shall be filled while I am away by a certain Rev. William Cox, who has been recommended to me by a college friend as an inexpensive but efficient supply on such occasions as this. He will present himself at Primrose Chapel in time for the service next Sunday morning, and doubtless you will introduce yourself to him, and tender what assistance and encouragement you deem fitting. I am afraid you may consider that I should have given you longer notice of my intentions, but if so, you must please remember that it is the privilege of us literary men to act impulsively.

“Trusting to return in good health, and to find that everything has gone on smoothly during my absence, I am, with kind regards to yourself and dear Mrs. Kronk, your sincere pastor,

“MARMADUKE MOON, M.A.”

“What is your opinion of it?” asked Mr. Goodman.

“That it is scandalous, perfectly scandalous,” replied Brown.

“I agree with you. If only as a matter of form, Mr. Moon ought to have asked the consent of myself and the other deacons before taking this holiday. And that is not the worst. We, and not he, should have chosen the supply. Who is this Rev. William Cox? For all we know, he may be quite incompetent to preach to such a congregation as ours.”

“I suppose there isn’t time to get someone else? Let me see; to-day is Friday, and that leaves us two days. Shall we try?”

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Mr. Goodman thought for a few moments, and then replied :

"No, we must put up with him. There might be a scene if he arrived on Sunday and found we had engaged another man."

"That's true. Jacob and Esau over again."

"Besides, it's not his fault. He is coming simply because he has been asked to come. Mr. Moon is the real transgressor. What a pity it is he took to writing novels! I said so long ago, and I say so now."

"What I object to most," remarked Brown, "is the dépôt Miss Minerva Grass runs at the chapel for the sale of copies of them. You ought to stop it."

"I couldn't without causing her pain. What makes her run it is that she's in love with him. Poor woman, I fear he's not in love with her. No, I shall let it alone. It's not exactly a dépôt. She attends for the purpose at certain of our meetings, that's all."

"And quite enough, it seems to me. But to go back to Mr. Cox. How are we to act towards him?"

"We will receive him with courtesy, and hope for the best. Yes, that is the proper attitude. After all, he may turn out all right. At anyrate, we ought to give him a fair chance."

Both went to Primrose Chapel on the following Sunday morning. Mr. Goodman, in accordance with his usual practice, started some time before Brown, and, getting there early, waited by himself at the gate. Presently he was joined by a bearded, medium-sized man, aged about forty-five, and wearing spectacles and clothes of a pronounced clerical cut.

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"Are you the Rev. William Cox?" inquired Mr. Goodman.

"The same," the man replied, lifting his hat and so disclosing the fact that he was partly bald.

"Then let me welcome you to Primrose Chapel. I am Mr. Zachariah Goodman, the chief deacon."

"I am glad to meet you. Our introduction is a little informal, but that is due to Mr. Moon. His letter appointing me his *locum tenens* did not reach me until the end of the week, and gave me only the address of the chapel and the hour I was to attend."

"Very irregular," said Mr. Goodman, shaking his head.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I did feel a bit handicapped," said Mr. Cox, with a smile. "It was quite a relief to me when you spoke. I had been fearing that I should have to find my own way to the pulpit."

"Not quite so bad as that. But now suppose we go inside. You can look round the building, and I can inform you as to the order of worship, and so on."

In due course the service began. At first there was a prejudice against Mr. Cox in the minds of some of the congregation, on account of the circumstances of his appointment. This soon wore off, however, for he acquitted himself well. His sermon was particularly effective. It was a great contrast to those of Mr. Moon. Instead of long words and rounded periods, there was consistent simplicity. Instead of vague sentimentality and weak attempts at wit, there was sober, practical teaching. The whole congregation was impressed by it, Mr. Goodman more deeply perhaps than most.

"A fine preacher," he remarked to Mrs. Kronk, who

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was sitting next to him, at the end of the service. "I have asked him to take dinner with us to-day. I knew you would be agreeable. If you will wait a minute or two with Mr. Brown, I will bring him, and we will all go home together."

Having said this, he walked through the chapel to the vestry. Mr. Cox was sitting there alone.

"Congratulations, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Goodman enthusiastically. "You are a success with us, a big success."

"I am very glad," replied Mr. Cox. "I was afraid that, entering against such a well-known horse as Mr. Moon, I might find myself altogether outclassed."

"I don't quite follow you."

"I mean," said Mr. Cox, flushing, "that I doubted whether my efforts would satisfy people who had been accustomed to the culture and eloquence of Mr. Moon. I used a sporting term. They seem to me so expressive sometimes."

"I see, I see. Well-known horse—outclassed—yes, of course. By the way, this reminds me of something I noticed in your sermon. Near the end you said, 'It's two to one on the Lord every time.' Do you remember?"

"Oh, yes! Another sporting term. Puts the matter very clearly, I think."

"Perhaps. But I don't like it, all the same."

"Why not? It's a fact."

"I don't dispute that. It's two to one, a hundred to one, a thousand to one, on the Lord every time. But—but—in short, sporting terms should not be used in such a connection. They lack reverence."

"I am sorry—" began Mr. Cox, flushing again.

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"Say no more," broke in Mr. Goodman, observing his embarrassment. "I understand. You had not perceived there was that objection to them. Now that you do, you are going to give them up. That's sufficient."

"I can't!" exclaimed Mr. Cox.

"Can't what? Can't give them up? Nonsense, nonsense!"

Mr. Cox frowned. Mr. Goodman looked at him in a puzzled way for a moment or two, and then said:

"I hope you're not offended with me. I quite appreciated the merits of your sermon as a whole, and I tendered my criticism in all kindness."

"No, no, I'm not offended. You are perfectly right. Sporting terms do lack reverence, and a minister ought not to use them, however expressive they may be. In spite of what I said just now, I fully realise this. But the habit has got such a hold on me that I'm unable to shake it off. I've often tried, and always failed."

"Very curious."

"And annoying, too. Believe me, they come to my lips almost spontaneously, and are out before I can stop them."

Mr. Goodman again looked at him in a puzzled way, and said:

"This is beyond me. May I ask how you acquired the habit?"

"I will tell you," said Mr. Cox, in agitated tones. "You have been so kind to me that I feel you are entitled to an explanation. You will consider it confidential?"

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“Strictly.”

Mr. Cox walked up and down the vestry two or three times, and then faced him determinedly and said :

“Briefly, it is this. To-day I am the Rev. William Cox, *locum tenens* at Primrose Chapel. Half-a-dozen years ago I was Bill Spottem, bookmaker and horse-racing expert. During my former career I acquired a sporting style of talk so thoroughly that it sticks to me even now. In everything else I am the Rev. William Cox, but in that I am still at times Bill Spottem.”

The man who stood with Mr. Goodman was in truth the man who had once stood with Brown and Powell outside Miss Fliffy Fluff’s house. A beard hid his prominent double chin ; spectacles softened the expression of his eyes ; the crown of his head had become bald ; he wore a black clerical suit, instead of a jaunty tweed one ; the loss of some teeth had altered his voice very considerably. But the man was the same man. The Rev. William Cox had been Bill Spottem, the bookmaker, and had also been Bill Spottem, the burglar.

“Most unfortunate!” commented Mr. Goodman. “But have courage, my friend. Persevere, and in time you will overcome this difficulty. Most unfortunate, but most interesting! I can hardly realise that you have been a bookmaker. How—how did the change take place?”

Mr. Cox replied to this question at some length. One day, he said, he read a tract which he found in a railway train. Something in it set him thinking. He reviewed his past life, and decided that it had been

idle and wicked. In the hope of being helped to better things, he attended some evangelical services. They showed him the right road, and he stepped into it gladly. Anxious to help others as he himself had been helped, he bought a chair and a reading desk, and became an open air preacher. Success in this capacity procured him an invitation to enter a college for training ministers. He accepted it, and went through the usual course with credit. Now he had left the college, and was doing supply work, pending a permanent charge.

Mr. Goodman listened sympathetically, and at the end offered formal congratulations. Then suddenly he started up, and exclaimed :

"Gracious me! I'd quite forgotten. My house-keeper is waiting to escort us home to dinner. Come on, come on!"

They hurried out of the chapel, and found Mrs. Kronk and Brown standing at the gate with Miss Grass and Miss Summers. Mr. Cox dropped the hymn-book he was carrying, and with difficulty suppressed a cry. He had been too far off from Brown during the service to notice him particularly. But now they were face to face, and he recognised him as one of his two partners in the Fluffy Fluff and other burglaries.

"Allow me, sir," said Brown, picking up the hymn-book.

Mr. Cox took it, and bowed mechanically ; then with a great effort he pulled himself together. Nobody, he reflected, seemed to have observed his alarm at the meeting. The alterations in his name, appearance, and voice evidently concealed his identity

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from Brown. There was no need for him to declare himself; and for the present, at any rate, he would not do so.

While arriving at this decision, he was introduced to the different members of the party. Afterwards there was some general talk. Mrs. Kronk, who was in a pleasant mood in spite of having been kept waiting so long, spoke in praise of the morning's sermon. The only thing in it which she did not like was, she said, the statement that the odds were two to one on the Lord. Mr. Cox murmured an apology, and Mr. Goodman saved him from any further criticism by pointing out that it was nearly dinner-time, and thus causing the party to break up.

On the way home, Mrs. Kronk and Brown walked in front, and Mr. Goodman and Mr. Cox followed at a little distance.

"She also noticed that sporting term," said Mr. Cox sadly.

"Yes," replied Mr. Goodman. "But cheer up! As I said before, with perseverance you will overcome the difficulty."

For a few moments Mr. Cox was silent. Then, slackening pace so as to allow the others to get well out of earshot, he said :

"Pardon my mentioning the matter again, but you will remember that the communication I made to you in the vestry was strictly confidential?"

"Of course! I promised, and I will keep my promise. No one shall know from me that you were once a bookmaker."

"Or even that I once passed under the *alias* of Bill Spottem?"

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"Not even that. So far as I am concerned, you shall always be the Rev. William Cox, and only the Rev. William Cox."

"Thanks, thanks! I regret my old life so much that I hate to be reminded of it in any way. I have done with worldly influences and excitements. The ministerial work to which I have set my hand is all that occupies my mind now."

But although Mr. Cox said this very emphatically, his thoughts during the next hour or two did not bear it out. They hovered about the jewels. What had become of them? Brown looked prosperous, and it seemed probable that he and Powell had dug them up and shared the proceeds. Was it not his duty to find out whether this was so, and if it was, then to make them disgorge for the benefit of Miss Fliffy Fluff? He decided in the affirmative, for he was really sincere in his new beliefs and professions. At the same time, he perceived the necessity of proceeding cautiously. Powell and Brown had been punished for their share in the burglary, but he had not for his, and he would be in danger from the police if his identity with Bill Spottem were known. As he reflected on this, he felt glad that he had confined his revelations to the bookmaker part of his former career.

CHAPTER VIII

METHUSALEH AND NEBUCHADNEZZAR

TWO or three weeks after the arrival of Mr. Cox at Primrose Chapel, Mr. Goodman was prostrated by illness. He had been ailing off and on for a long time, but this was more than a simple ailment. So serious was it, indeed, that for days it seemed likely to terminate fatally. He himself did little to combat it, for he was now over seventy, and feeble with old age. The doctor and Mrs. Kronk, who was acting as nurse, did wonders, however, and at last the critical stage was passed. He was still ill, but was in a fair way towards recovery.

One evening, at this period, Mrs. Kronk was sitting in the parlour with Brown, who had just returned from business, and Mr. Cox, who had looked in to inquire about Mr. Goodman, when she heard a violent knocking at the street door.

"Some people have no consideration," she remarked. "The idea of making a noise like that, with an invalid upstairs!"

Presently the servant came in with the announcement that the caller was Miss Summers.

"Bring her here, please," said Mrs. Kronk.

Miss Summers entered, carrying a book. Her

cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright, and her lips set. She seemed very excited about something.

"How do you do?" she asked. "And Mr. Goodman, how is he?"

"He was a little better when I saw him last," replied Mrs. Kronk. "I'm afraid, though, you must have disturbed him. You knocked with unnecessary loudness."

"I'm sorry! I didn't intend to. The fact is, I'm terribly upset. Look at this, all of you."

She threw on the table the book she had brought in with her. Mr. Cox opened it, and read aloud the words on the front page. They were :

THE TROUBLES OF A TABERNACLE.

A New Novel

By the Rev. MARMADUKE MOON, M.A.

"I don't think much of the title," commented Mrs. Kronk.

"And I don't of the book, or of the man who wrote it either," said Miss Summers. "There are some books which ought to be burned, and some writers who ought to be kicked."

"What's wrong? What's the book about?"

"It's a cruel burlesque. Primrose Chapel is the tabernacle, and its members are the people who cause the troubles. Mr. Goodman, and I, and you, and a lot more of us, are caricatured under other names. Personally, I don't mind a bit. I've laughed at Mr. Moon often, and he only makes us quits by laughing at me now. But I bitterly resent his

treatment of Mr. Goodman. He should have left our poor friend alone, whatever else he did."

Brown and Mr. Cox looked at each other in consternation. Mrs. Kronk rose to her feet, and said sternly :

" I cannot believe that he has dared to do this."

" He has, though," said Miss Summers. " Just glance at the beginning of the second chapter. It refers to Mr. Goodman, and will convince you that I'm speaking the truth."

Mrs. Kronk picked up the book, and read the part indicated. When she had finished, she exclaimed :

" Disgraceful ! According to this, Mr. Goodman is—is—"

" A combination of Methusaleh and Nebuchadnezzar," put in Miss Summers, as Mrs. Kronk paused, at a loss for an adequate definition. " He's not actually labelled that, but he's given all their peculiarities, which amounts to the same thing. Methusaleh and Nebuchadnezzar, indeed ! Yes, it's disgraceful, especially when one thinks of the dear old man lying ill upstairs."

" He must not see the book in its present state," observed Brown. " He would have a relapse."

" That's why I called. Miss Grass lent me this copy an hour ago. Directly I realised what the subject was, I ran round to warn you. Mr. Moon is quite capable of sending a copy here. If he does, lose it, bury it, or burn it. At any rate, keep it from Mr. Goodman."

Mrs. Kronk showed considerable agitation at this injunction. In reply to questioning glances, she said :

" I'm afraid we're too late. I've just remembered

that a parcel arrived by the last post, and that I took it to him. I didn't wait until he opened it, but I'm almost certain there was a book inside."

"This is serious," said Brown.

"Very," said Miss Summers. "I'd have done anything to have prevented it."

"Pardon me," said Mr. Cox. "The parcel may have contained a book, but it doesn't necessarily follow that the book was 'The Troubles of a Tabernacle.'"

"That's true," said Miss Summers hopefully "Perhaps it was a volume of sermons, or something of that sort."

"I'll go up to his room and see," replied Mrs. Kronk. "Even if it was 'The Troubles of a Tabernacle,' he may not have looked at it yet, and I may be able to bring it down on some pretext or other."

While she was away, the three who were left talked but little. With Miss Summers and Brown, silence was due to anxiety about Mr. Goodman. In the case of Mr. Cox, there was a different reason. A certain theory as to the Fluffy Fluff jewels had just formed in his mind, and he was examining it eagerly.

Some time had passed since his interest in their fate had been revived, and during it he had given the matter much attention. He had made discreet inquiries about Brown, and had learned how long he had been employed by Mr. Goodman, and what was their present relationship. He had ascertained, too, that the district in which the jewels had been hidden was the one in which he now was, and had consequently considered whether or no they had been discovered while it was being built on. The fact,

however, that parts of it had remained in their original state, and that he was ignorant of the exact whereabouts of the burial-place, had hitherto prevented him from arriving at any decision on the point.

But the theory which he was examining so eagerly got over these difficulties. Briefly it was as follows :

Mr. Goodman, the builder of many of the houses in the district, had found the jewels and appropriated them. On coming out of prison, Brown had accused him of this. He had admitted it, and they had made an amicable arrangement. By this Brown had become a partner in Mr. Goodman's business, in which the proceeds of the jewels had been sunk. It was true that at first he had passed as a clerk, but he had done this merely to avert possible suspicion.

"Here she comes," said Miss Summers, at the sound of footsteps descending the stairs. "I hope it's all right."

Mr. Cox gave a last glance at the theory, and then jumped up and opened the door. Mrs. Kronk entered. Her face showed that the news she brought was bad.

"Too late!" she said. "The book was 'The Troubles of a Tabernacle,' and he was crying over it when I went in."

"Crying?" interrogated Miss Summers.

"Yes, like a child. He had just reached that second chapter."

"Poor old man! Do you know who sent the copy? The publishers, I suppose. Mr. Moon must have asked them to do so before he left. Oh! it was wicked, wicked!"

"I think I'll go up to him, Mrs. Kronk," said Brown.

"Do! He expressed a wish for a talk with you. Cheer him as much as you can. He's very low. Indeed, I'm not sure that the doctor oughtn't to see him to-night."

"He certainly ought," said Miss Summers. "Shall I fetch him? I know his address."

"If you wouldn't mind."

Miss Summers at once put on her hat, and started for the doctor's house. Brown went to Mr. Goodman's room, and found him sitting up in bed. He looked very pale and ill, and his eyes were still wet with tears. "The Troubles of a Tabernacle" lay open before him.

"I am sorry," said Brown, clasping his hand sympathetically.

"Thank you," replied Mr. Goodman, in a weak voice. "It's hurt me—it's hurt me badly. How could he have done it? I've always been kind and considerate to him."

"I know you have. You're that to everybody."

"It isn't as if he jeers only at me. He attacks Primrose Chapel, the child of my old age, as well. On one page he compares it to a dissolving views entertainment, on another to an underground railway station, and on another to a Noah's Ark. I don't know what he means, but it's none the less hard to bear on that account."

"You mustn't take it to heart so much," said Brown soothingly. "The book won't do any real harm. It'll be forgotten in a month or two. The chapel, on the contrary, will flourish for centuries"

"I used to think it would, but I don't now. Its days are numbered. It will die soon after I die."

"Well, that won't be yet awhile. You're going to live for years."

Mr. Goodman sank back in the bed and closed his eyes.

"Yes, for years and years," continued Brown encouragingly.

Mr. Goodman opened his eyes, and said :

"No, my dear friend, but a few hours. This blow has shattered me. The end is very near. Oh! but it is hard to go, and leave Primrose Chapel at Mr. Moon's mercy."

Brown again spoke to him soothingly, but he appeared to be deep in thought, and paid little attention. Suddenly, with an astonishing access of strength, he started up and exclaimed :

"It shall not be left at his mercy. Listen! You shall become a deacon in my place, and Mr. Cox the permanent minister instead of Mr. Moon. I shall die, but Primrose Chapel shall live. You and Mr. Cox shall steer it on and on in long-continued prosperity. You consent? Say that you do! Say that it shall be so!"

Brown was both surprised and pleased at the proposal. After a moment's hesitation, he replied :

"Yes, I consent. But suppose I'm not elected deacon? Besides, what about Mr. Moon? He won't allow himself to be turned out without a struggle."

"Defeat him, then! A two-thirds majority at a general meeting is all that is wanted. You and Mr. Cox can secure that."

"H'm!" said Brown, a little dubiously. "Well, at any rate we will try."

"And you will succeed. Tell the members what Mr. Moon has written about the chapel. Tell them that it was my last wish that he should go, and Mr. Cox be minister. They will give you the two-thirds majority."

He sank back again, exhausted by the effort he had made.

Brown leaned over him, and judged from his appearance that in truth the end could not be far off. In a rush of pity, he said :

"I will tell them. And I will do everything else I can for the welfare of the chapel. I will endeavour to be to it, indeed, all that you yourself have been. I promise this most solemnly."

A smile came to Mr. Goodman's face.

"My dear, dear friend," he murmured, "bless you for those words. They fill me with happiness. Verily, I cast my bread upon the waters when I helped you in your straits."

"I owe you many times this," said Brown, with a blush. "You did so much for me."

"No, no. I watched over you, and you have promised to watch over Primrose Chapel. What could I desire more? I am repaid to the full."

For a few moments neither spoke. Then they heard a knock at the street door, and Mr. Goodman said :

"I wonder who that is?"

"Probably the doctor. Mrs. Kronk sent for him a little while ago."

"It was kind of her. I want to see him. I want,

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too, to see a solicitor. I was about to ask you whether it is too late to find one to-night. Is it?"

"No; it's only about eight. But wouldn't to-morrow do? You look very tired."

"I fear to put it off. To-night I can think and talk, but to-morrow I may not be able to. Please try to find one. It is very important."

"I will go at once."

"Thank you, thank you! Just a few words more about Primrose Chapel before you go. Mr. Moon must cease to be minister. But deal with him as gently as possible. Assure him that I forgive him freely, and wish him success in any honest work he may afterwards undertake. And—and—there is yet another thing."

"Yes?"

"It is this. If the congregation should grow larger, if in time there should be sufficient funds, I should like a steeple to be put on Primrose Chapel. It looks well as it is, but with that it would look even better. Arrange this, my dear friend, if you can. I built the chapel. It remains for you to crown it with a steeple."

"I will consider it part of my promise to you," replied Brown, as the doctor entered. "Some day it shall be done."

Early the next morning Mr. Goodman died. The doctor said this somewhat unexpected termination of the illness was due to the weakness of old age. Others, however, attributed it to "The Troubles of a Tabernacle." Probably they were right. Mr. Goodman had been steadily improving, and, but for the

nervous collapse caused by that book, would very likely have recovered altogether.

The sad event made a great change in Brown's worldly position. Mr. Goodman had seen a solicitor in time, and had added a codicil to his will. The effect of this was that, after certain specific legacies were paid, the residue of his property went to Brown. The bequest was unconditional, although it was accompanied by the expression of a hope that he would remember his promise as to Primrose Chapel.

Brown was very grateful. He determined to keep the promise. Already he worked hard at the chapel ; but in the future he would work even harder. Mr. Goodman had subscribed liberally to the different societies connected with it, and he would do the same. The matter of the steeple could not be arranged just yet, but it should be before many years had passed. In short, he would prove himself worthy in every detail of the trust that had been placed in him.

On the day after the funeral, he and Mrs. Kronk, who was staying on with him as his housekeeper, again sat with Miss Summers and Mr. Cox in the parlour. He had told Mrs. Kronk of the project that he should become a deacon and Mr. Cox the permanent minister. She had approved of it, and had suggested a consultation with the other two as to how it might best be carried out. Accordingly, he had asked them to call. Now they had come, and he proceeded to lay the project before them.

"Splendid !" exclaimed Miss Summers, when he had finished. "Don't you think it is, Mr Cox ?"

"I am so surprised that I hardly know what to

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think," he replied. "I'm afraid, though, I'm not very enthusiastic."

"It was Mr. Goodman's express wish," urged Brown. "He was most emphatic about it."

Mr. Cox meditated for a moment or two, and then said :

"Mr. Goodman was very kind to me, and I should be sorry to go against his wishes. Still, I don't quite like the idea. I see no objection to your becoming deacon, but I do to my becoming minister. It seems a little underhanded."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, to accept an appointment as *locum tenens* for Mr. Moon, and then to turn him out altogether. Yes, it's certainly a bit off the straight."

"You're too scrupulous," said Miss Summers, with a laugh. "Do you think Mr. Moon would hesitate in similar circumstances?"

"Perhaps not; but I must be guided by my own sense of right and wrong, and not by his."

"It appears to me," said Mrs. Kronk, "that you do not properly appreciate the situation. Primrose Chapel is in danger. Mr. Moon has shown by this disgraceful book of his that he is not fit to be the minister. The chapel cannot prosper under him. If he continues in charge, it will become less and less useful, and will finally die. You can save it, and it is your duty to do so. To talk about being underhanded is to talk nonsense."

"But—but—won't someone else do?" asked Mr. Cox. "There are dozens as well qualified as I who would be glad of the appointment."

"It's you or nobody. The Primrose people will

not dismiss Mr. Moon on the mere chance of getting a better man. But if you're put forward as his successor, the case is different. They know you, and like you. There'll be a certainty before them, instead of a chance."

"True," said Brown. "Won't you consent, Mr. Cox?"

"Please do!" added Miss Summers.

"I can't quite make up my mind," replied Mr. Cox. "Give me a minute to myself."

He leaned his head on his hand, and thought. The objection he had mentioned was an honest one. He really felt that he would be acting meanly in using his temporary position as a stepping-stone to a permanent one. Besides, there was another objection. His theory that Brown and Mr. Goodman had shared the jewels had been supported by the terms of Mr. Goodman's will, and he had adopted it as correct. Again and again during the last day or two he had been worried as to what he should do in the matter. Several times he had even been tempted to take a sinful course.

Should he disclose his identity with Bill Spottem? If so, to what end? To ask Brown to find out Miss Fluffy Fluff and pay her the whole of the proceeds of the jewels? Or to ask for his third as one of the partners in the burglary, with the intention of putting it by as a provision for his old age? This was the temptation that had assailed him. So far he had overcome it, but he was afraid that, if he accepted the appointment and continued in constant association with Brown, it might ultimately prove too strong for him.

On the other side was his natural desire to have a congregation of his own. Supply work was interesting, but it was not so satisfactory as a settled charge. In addition to this desire, there were the special reasons which Mrs. Kronk had urged. Perhaps Mr. Moon would in truth kill the chapel if allowed to remain ; perhaps he, and only he, could save it from him ; perhaps it was his duty to try to turn him out. He turned from side to side of the case in perplexity. Now he was inclined to face the temptation, and now to flee from it.

"Well," said Mrs. Kronk, after a full minute had passed, "is it 'Yes'?"

"If Primrose Chapel wants me, it can have me," he replied, with sudden decision. "I enter myself against Mr. Moon. May it be a fast race, and may the best man win ! "

Mrs. Kronk thanked him, and then immediately started a discussion as to the means to be employed to secure the respective elections of him and Brown. This continued for some time, all four giving their ideas in turn. At last it seemed to her that the plan of campaign was clear.

"To sum up," she said, "the two matters are to be brought forward at the general meeting this day four weeks. In the meantime, we are to canvass openly for Mr. Brown. With regard to Mr. Cox, we are to be more circumspect, so as to avoid an organised opposition. His popularity is to be increased in all possible ways. Members are not to be told what is intended, but to be induced to wish that he were staying longer. Comparisons between him and Mr. Moon are to be suggested. His superior

merits are to be urged whenever there is an opportunity. That's about what we've agreed upon, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied Miss Summers. "That, and the circulation of 'The Troubles of a Tabernacle' among the congregation to stir up feeling against Mr. Moon."

The others assented, and shortly afterwards the party broke up. Previously to this, however, Mrs. Kronk produced a bottle of red currant wine and some glasses from a cupboard, and said :

"I believe some people always drink before beginning their different undertakings. I don't know that it's altogether a commendable practice, but—"

"Allow me, Mrs. Kronk," put in Mr. Cox. "I think I am more at home at this sort of thing than you are."

He took the bottle from her, filled the glasses, and passed them round.

"Success to us at the next Primrose Chapel general meeting shall be the toast," he said. "Are you ready?"

All four raised their glasses, and looked at one another. All four cried :

"Success to us at the next Primrose Chapel general meeting!"

Then all four slowly drank the red currant wine.

CHAPTER IX

A CHANGE IN MINISTERS

DURING the month before the general meeting the conspirators worked hard on the lines agreed upon. Mrs. Kronk gave tea-parties to influential ladies of the Primrose congregation, at which she produced "The Troubles of a Tabernacle," and read and commented on the worst parts. Miss Summers and Brown used the opportunities their respective offices of chapel keeper and honorary secretary to the Dorcas Society afforded. Mr. Cox continued to preach good practical sermons, and was very affable to everybody. After the Sunday services all four of them moved among the members who stood gossiping outside the chapel, and dropped remarks likely to help towards the end in view.

The position at the end of the month seemed decidedly promising. In the case of Brown a walk over was probable. His claims to be one of the deacons were strongly supported, and so far no other candidate had appeared. A contest was, of course, inevitable in the case of Mr. Cox, but there was reason to be sanguine about the result. He had become more and more, and Mr. Moon less and less, popular each week. It was true that Miss Grass

openly expressed a preference for Mr. Moon's preaching, but this was to be expected. She was so much in love with him that, as Miss Summers put it, she would have backed his sermons against even those of a prophet or an archangel.

The general meetings at Primrose Chapel were held at the beginning of every quarter. This was the April one. The evening on which it was to take place was fine, and a large attendance was anticipated. Brown had been in good spirits all day, but he felt nervous and worried as he entered the chapel. A difficult task lay before him. He had to propose delicately, yet effectively, the resolution for the dismissal of Mr. Moon, and the appointment of Mr. Cox.

He went to his old seat over the jewels, and was soon afterwards joined by Mrs. Kronk and Miss Summers. The meeting was to start at eight o'clock, and there were still five or six minutes to wait. During them Brown reflected on the speech he had to make, and Mrs. Kronk and Miss Summers whispered together earnestly. Mr. Cox, who was seated at a table in front of the pulpit, watched the arrival of the members, and speculated as to which would and which would not vote for him. Miss Grass played a voluntary on the organ.

Eight o'clock struck. Miss Grass gazed down at the door leading to the vestry. Nearly everybody else gazed at it also. A letter from Mr. Moon, stating that he would return in time to preside this evening, had been read to the congregation on the previous Sunday. Special interest was aroused by his approaching entrance. In part this was due

to the fact that no one connected with the chapel had seen him for two months, and in part to the publication of "The Troubles of a Tabernacle."

The door opened, and he appeared. Miss Grass, after casting one fond glance at his chubby little figure, turned swiftly and began to play "See the Conquering Hero comes." He paused for a moment, and then proceeded to the table. ("See the Conquering Hero comes.") A gratified smile spread over his face as he sat down beside Mr. Cox. Did he not, he asked himself, deserve this greeting? Had he not written novels? Had he not been to Paris? ("See the Conquering Hero comes.") Undoubtedly he deserved it, and Miss Grass was a very pleasant, discriminating person.

The organ ceased to sound, and he rose to address the meeting. Indignant looks met his. The Primrose people, as a body, evidently did not view his advent in the same light as Miss Grass. Perhaps, he considered, they objected to what he had said about them in "The Troubles of a Tabernacle." Well, let them. Some day they would have more sense, and would realise that it was an honour to be referred to, however opprobriously, in one of his books.

He had proposed to lead off with a speech, suggesting that during his holiday the congregation had probably missed him more than he had them, hoping that Mr. Cox had not preached very dull sermons, and so on, in what he called his humorous style. But in view of this hostile attitude, he changed his mind, and glancing at the agenda paper which had been placed before him, said :

"The first business is the election of a new deacon.

Since I last stood here, Mr. Zachariah Goodman has left us for ever. I am sure you all regret the sad event as much as I do. Primrose Chapel is greatly indebted to him. He founded it, and assisted its growth generously. I do not deny that he had faults, but who among us has not? Virtues he had, too; and we will be charitable, and think only of them. And now, having paid this tribute to him, I shall be pleased to receive the names of candidates for the vacancy in the diaconate caused by his death. The election will be by ballot."

A member nominated Brown, and two or three others spoke briefly in support of him. Then there was silence, until Mr. Moon said :

" Is Mr. Brown the sole candidate ? "

No one replied, and he went on :

" I conclude that he is. A ballot is therefore not necessary. I simply submit to you a resolution that he be appointed. Those in favour of it, please signify so in the usual manner."

Hands rose everywhere.

" That will do. Now, those against ! "

There was no response.

" I declare the resolution carried, and Mr. Brown duly elected a deacon of Primrose Chapel," said Mr. Moon. " I trust he will prove himself worthy of the honour that has been conferred upon him."

Then again glancing at the agenda paper, he said :

" Mr. Brown is concerned in the next business also. I read here that he is to bring before the meeting a matter of importance, and to ask for an expression of opinion thereon. The entry is not very explicit. Don't you think, Mr. Brown, you might

have given the secretary a little more information? There are so many matters of importance in this world, you know. What is this particular one? An increase in my salary?"

Mr. Moon smiled as he spoke, but there was no answering smile from Brown. He stood up, a strained yet resolute look on his face, and said:

"No; decidedly not that! This instead. You have written a novel, Mr. Moon, which throws ridicule on Primrose Chapel. I object to it very strongly. And—"

He was interrupted by cries of "Hear, hear!" and clappings of hands.

"And," he continued, when they had ceased, "I consider that it severs all ties binding me and my fellow-members to you. What have we to do with a minister who laughs at us? Nothing, nothing! We want one who will sympathise with us—one who has a heart, one who has some sense of duty."

Again there was applause. At the end of it a voice called out:

"Mr. Cox is the man for us!"

So far Mr. Moon had kept silent, but he could do so no longer.

"I will not be insulted in this way!" he shouted, with a grotesque air of outraged dignity. "Sit down, Mr. Brown."

"Not until I have finished what I have to say," replied Brown, encouraged by the knowledge that the feeling of the meeting was with him. "I shall not be long, though. Someone remarked just now that Mr. Cox is the man for us, and that remark brings me straight to my point. Listen, everybody! Mr. Cox

is, and Mr. Moon is not, the man for us. We must make a change. I move as a formal resolution that the office of minister of Primrose Chapel be taken from Mr. Moon and given to Mr. Cox. Will another member second this?"

It had been arranged among the conspirators that Mrs. Kronk should act in this capacity, if no one else seemed inclined to ; but her services were not required. Half-a-dozen people, including Mr. Lambert, one of the deacons, simultaneously rose and said :

"I will!"

Brown looked at them in perplexity for a moment, and then decided that Mr. Lambert would be the best, and accordingly named him as his choice.

"I have much pleasure in seconding the resolution," said Mr. Lambert, as the others sat down. "Both my wife and I think Mr. Moon's novel disgraceful, and we both like Mr. Cox immensely. The resolution is an honour to you, Mr Brown, and a proof that Primrose Chapel has done wisely in electing you a deacon. I trust that every member present will vote for it. My wife and I most certainly will."

"And I most certainly will not!" exclaimed Miss Grass, who had come down from the organ and was standing near Mr. Moon. "It is a foolish and vulgar proposal, and—"

There were loud cries of "Order!" and "Shame!"

"And," she went on, raising her voice, "only foolish and vulgar people will support it."

The cries were renewed. She frowned defiantly, but made no further attempt to overcome them. When they ceased, Mr. Moon drew himself up to his full height, and said :

"You have shouted down Miss Grass, but you shall not shout me down. I agree with her. Only foolish and vulgar people will support the resolution. The novel out of which it arises is, I assume, 'The Troubles of a Tabernacle.' I do not intend to enter into a detailed discussion with you as to that work. Why should I? I have in my pocket a newspaper cutting which says it is a perfect piece of art, and that is enough for me. But I do intend to ask you some questions as to it. Mr. Brown suggests that it throws ridicule on Primrose Chapel. Well, suppose it does. What then? Is not ridicule one of the finest tonics in the world? Will it not benefit the chapel? Was it not my duty to administer it if I thought it was needed? These are my questions, and I pause for a reply."

"And I will give you one," said Miss Summers, starting up angrily. "Some ridicule may be a tonic, but your sort isn't. 'The Troubles of a Tabernacle' benefit the chapel? No, no, no! It has already lost us Mr. Goodman. But for it, he would be here this evening, alive and well. Yes, I mean that. The cowardly ingratitude of it killed him. He read it one day, and was gone the next. Shame upon you, Mr. Moon—shame upon you! His death lies at your door as surely as if you had thrust a dagger through his heart."

A murmur of indignation ran round the chapel. For a little while Mr. Moon stood silent and abashed. Then, with an effort, he said :

"But—but—I was told that the cause of his death was—"

"It doesn't matter what you were told," broke in

Miss Summers. "That book, and only that book, was the cause. How could you have written it? Leave Mr. Goodman out of the question. Think of what you owe to Primrose Chapel; think how well it has always treated you; think of the salary you have drawn from it for years. I ask you again, how, in the face of all this, could you have written that wretched book?"

"How dare you use such an expression?" exclaimed Mr. Moon, with a stamp of his foot. "How dare you call my book wretched?"

Miss Summers did not reply. Satisfied with the effect the word had produced, she shrugged her shoulders contemptuously and sat down.

"I insist on an answer," said Mr. Moon, with another stamp of his foot.

So far Mr. Cox had taken no part in the proceedings, but now he rose and said:

"Control yourself. Remember that you're addressing a lady, not a stable-boy."

Mr. Moon faced round on him, and cried:

"You to talk to me like this! You who have turned the hearts of my people from me! You who are the dregs in the cup that is given me to swallow!"

"I repeat, sir, control yourself."

Before Mr. Moon could reply, Miss Grass intervened.

"A point of order! A point of order!" she said excitedly. "This is a general meeting of the chapel. Mr. Cox has no right here. Our rules provide that only members may attend a general meeting. He is not one. I call upon him to withdraw immediately."

Mr. Cox looked about him, as if for guidance. At a whisper from Mrs. Kronk, Brown jumped up and said :

"The circumstances are exceptional. Mr. Cox is not a member; but he has been acting as our supply minister up to this very morning, and that, I think, justifies his presence. If necessary, I will put a motion to this effect."

"You needn't trouble," said Mr. Moon, who had become somewhat calmer. "Miss Grass's point is correct, and I recognise gratefully the spirit which prompts her to raise it. But, as chairman of the meeting, I decide that Mr. Cox may stay. I do so for a particular reason. He has taken advantage of my absence abroad to usurp my place in the affections of my congregation. I want him to give a public explanation of his mean and treacherous conduct."

Again there were cries of "Order!" and "Shame!" Mr. Cox held up his hand for silence, and said :

"Members of Primrose Chapel, I thank you for resenting this accusation. I deny that my conduct has been mean or treacherous. The resolution as to the change of ministers is none of my seeking, although I admit that I knew of it before to-night. When first asked to stand as a candidate against Mr. Moon, I refused. The request was renewed, and in support of it the facts about 'The Troubles of a Tabernacle' and the death of Mr. Goodman were brought to my notice. Then, and only then, I consented. Members of Primrose Chapel, have I in all this acted meanly or treacherously?"

A great shout of "No!" was the reply.

"I thank you again," continued Mr. Cox. "Presently you will have to decide whether Mr. Moon or I shall be your minister. I am a blunt man, and I say straight out that I advise you to put your money on me. I will serve you faithfully, according to the best of my powers. Primrose Chapel shall be that which I hold dearest in life, and night and day I will strive for its welfare. Should it want a tonic, as Mr. Moon suggests it does, I will give it one, but not of 'The Troubles of a Tabernacle' sort. That brings me to the last point I wish to urge on behalf of my candidature. I am not, and never will be, a novel-writing minister."

After the applause which followed this, Mr. Lambert got up and said :

"My wife and I think that Mr. Cox's manly words must have convinced everybody that he is a better minister than Mr. Moon. We also think that the resolution might now be put to the meeting, further discussion being quite unnecessary."

"Hear, hear!" said Brown and several others.

Mr. Moon began a protest against this proposal, but anger and mortification choked his utterance. Miss Grass, however, took up the tale.

"Mr. Cox a better minister than Mr. Moon?" she cried. "Why, they're not to be mentioned in the same breath. Mr. Moon is an M.A., and a man of individual taste and talent and soul. What is Mr. Cox? Nothing more or less than a public-house frequenter."

"Madam!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," she went on, "a public-house frequenter! Only last night I saw him enter 'The Three Crowns'

in the High Street. Can he deny it? I dare him to. If he does, I will find out which barmaid served him, and she shall prove my statement."

All eyes were directed at Mr. Cox. He flushed, but did not speak. An expression of joy came to Mr. Moon's face, and one of sorrow to most others.

"He is guilty," said Miss Grass, after a few moments. "His silence shows it."

Then at last Mr. Cox spoke.

"I admit," he said slowly, "that I did pay a visit to 'The Three Crowns' last night. But—"

"There, foolish people, is your choice!" she cried, pointing at him in triumph. "A man who haunts public-houses within a stone's throw of this very chapel; a man who is a beer drinker, a wine bibber, and a whisky devourer; a man who—"

"Stop, woman!" shouted Mr. Cox. "I am a staunch teetotaller. Not a drop of intoxicating liquor has passed my lips for years. When you interrupted me, I was about to explain that the visit you refer to was a perfectly harmless one. Neither beer, nor wine, nor whisky was its object."

"Oh, indeed," she said, with a sneer. "Then what was?"

"I will tell you. Last night I wrote a most important letter, and then found I had no stamps. I went round to the post office, but it was closed. The letter had to be sent off that night, and so somewhere or other I had to get a stamp. 'The Three Crowns' seemed a likely place, and I went in and succeeded in obtaining one from the barmaid. Of course, in common courtesy I had a drink before I left the house; but I give you my word that it

was only a lemonade, and that the primary object of my visit was the stamp."

This explanation was received with angry incredulity by Miss Grass and Mr. Moon, but with enthusiasm by the audience generally. An attempt was made to continue the controversy, but Brown and two or three others checked it. The time had undoubtedly come, they said, for a vote to be taken, and no useful purpose could be served by more talk.

"Well," remarked Mr. Moon, "as chairman of the meeting, I refuse to put the resolution."

"But—" began Brown, in consternation.

"I definitely refuse," said Mr. Moon. "I rule it out of order, in fact."

"Appoint another chairman," suggested Miss Summers.

"Do without one. Put it yourself," suggested Mr. Lambert. "My wife and I are of opinion that the vote will count just the same."

Brown considered for a moment or two, and then said :

"Our rules provide that a change of ministers can be effected by a two-thirds majority at any general meeting. All we want to be sure about is, I think, that we get that. Yes, I will put it myself. Ladies and gentlemen, the resolution before you is that the office of minister of Primrose Chapel be taken from Mr. Moon and given to Mr. Cox. Those in favour of it please hold up their right hands. Thanks! Now those against!"

A multitude of hands rose on the former occasion, but only four on the latter. One of these was, of course, Miss Grass. The others were a gentleman

who was very deaf and consequently misunderstood the instructions, a fierce teetotaller who felt that Mr. Cox ought not to have entered 'The Three Crowns' even for so innocent a purpose as the purchase of a postage stamp, and an old lady who supported Mr. Moon because she believed in the divine right of ministers theory.

"I declare the resolution carried by a clear two-thirds majority," said Brown.

"And I declare it informal and invalid!" exclaimed Miss Grass; "and protest against its being acted upon."

Mr. Moon again drew himself up to his full height, and again assumed an air of outraged dignity.

"It is kind of you, Miss Grass, but please do not trouble," he said. "Members of Primrose Chapel, I renounce you. I would not continue to be your minister if you were to kneel before me in sackcloth and ashes and entreat me to. For years I have given to you what was meant for mankind at large; but I will do so no longer. Your resolution is null and void, and does not affect the matter. I simply resign my office. Let there be no misunderstanding on this point. Instead of your washing your hands of me, I wash mine of you. I am not dismissed; I resign."

"And I, too, resign!" cried Miss Grass. "You can get a new organist as soon as you like. I refuse to play another note for such a congregation. If I did, I should feel I was degrading both music and myself."

"Thanks, thanks," said Mr. Moon, stepping off the

platform to her. "Your decision is an honour to you, just as mine is to me. They are a vain, stiff-necked people. We will leave them; we will shake the dust of their place off our feet."

They walked to the door near the pulpit, and passed out arm-in-arm. When they had gone, Mr. Cox expressed his thanks to those who had voted for him, and then, as minister of the chapel, and therefore *ex-officio* chairman, closed the meeting. Afterwards he held a reception in the vestry, many members joining him there and congratulating him on his election. Among them were Brown, Miss Summers, and Mrs. Kronk.

When he left, it was in company with these three. Miss Summers at once went into her house, which was at the side of the chapel, and took Mrs. Kronk with her, they having arranged to eat supper together. He and Brown lived in different directions, but before separating they paced up and down the road a few times, talking about the incidents of the evening.

"I think I'd better be going now," said Brown, at last. "We've done well, all things considered."

"We have," said Mr. Cox. "A double event isn't brought off every day. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" repeated Brown, walking away.

"Decidedly well, all things considered," thought Mr. Cox, as he also walked on. "He one of the deacons, and I the minister of Primrose Chapel; and half-a-dozen years ago both of us burglars. Powell, Brown, & Spottem. Yes, that was the firm that scooped the Fluffy Fluff jewels. A quaint world! Brown a deacon, Spottem a minister. And Powell?

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I wonder what's become of him? Dead, perhaps. Those high-spirited fellows often go under during penal servitude."

Powell was not dead. Soon after leaving Mr. Cox, Brown turned a corner. A man who had been standing at the opposite corner crossed over and hurried after him. Hearing the sound of quick footsteps, Brown looked back. The man was very near, and he immediately recognised him as Powell. There could be no doubt on the point. Powell, a little changed; but still unmistakably Powell.

"Heavens!" muttered Brown. "On this of all nights!"

"How are you?" said Powell, coming up to him with outstretched hand. "Quite a long time since we last met!"

Brown shook hands with him reluctantly, and said:

"I'm all right, thanks. How are you?"

"Oh, fairly fit! Hard up, though. Could just about do with my third of those jewels."

"Surely you know—" began Brown.

"Yes, yes!" broke in Powell. "Tree cut down; field built on; jewels hopelessly lost. I knew a couple of years ago. Probably as soon as you. My remark about my third was simply a regret. I really am deucedly hard up."

Brown's face cleared. The meeting was not so serious as he had feared. It would only lead to his treating Powell in the benevolent way in which he himself had once been treated by Mr. Goodman.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Perhaps I can help you. We'll have a quiet talk together, at any rate. Will

you come in with me now? My house is only a few doors farther."

"Gladly," replied Powell. "A quiet talk will be the very thing."

CHAPTER X

THE VIEWS OF CONVICT 99

"THESE are nice comfortable quarters," said Powell, looking round the room into which he was presently ushered by Brown. "You've got on since you left prison."

"Tolerably," replied Brown. "A little property, and a fair social position."

"And how've you managed it all?"

"Oh, attending strictly to business, keeping out of bad company, and so on. But talking about bad company—"

He paused, with a startled expression on his face.

"What's the matter?" asked Powell.

"I've just remembered that you're an escaped convict. Suppose I'm dropped on for harbouring you? I might be, you know, although it's so long since the escape."

"That's all right," said Powell, with a smile. "I've served my full term. Discharged as cured a fortnight ago."

"What, were you caught again?" exclaimed Brown, relieved but surprised by the information. "There was nothing about it in the newspaper."

"No, not caught. Gave myself up."

"H'm ! I shouldn't have expected you to do that. What were the circumstances ?"

"I'll tell you," replied Powell, with another smile. "Three or four days after walking out of quod I reached London. I had had a pretty rough time of it, dodging police officers and amateur detectives ; but now the danger seemed over. An old theatrical friend on whom I called fitted me out, not only with clothes, but also with a false beard and moustache. I was another man. Even my creditors would not have recognised me.

"Disguised in this way, I started off to look for the jewels. I was a bit afraid that you might have fore-stalled me, but not very much. Your slow, nervous temperament would, I thought, have prevented your doing anything so soon. Of course, there was the danger that you might have been roused to action by my escape. But I trusted that you had not heard of that, and was, on the whole, sanguine of finding the jewels where we had buried them."

"Excuse me," put in Brown ; "I object to your describing my temperament as slow and nervous. Let that pass, though. I object still more to your going for the jewels on your own account, after having asked me not to do so. You even threatened to hunt me down and kill me, if I didn't wait till we could go together. Don't you remember ?"

"Yes, I remember ; we are all melodramatic sometimes. But as to your objection, I assure you on my honour that, if I had found the jewels, I should have taken only my share and Spottem's, and have left yours for you."

"Yes, but that's hardly to the point," began Brown,

and then continued : "however, it doesn't matter. Go on. You were about to tell me why you gave yourself up."

"Well," said Powell, "I got to this neighbourhood in due course, and saw what had happened. Houses, houses, houses ! I needn't describe how I felt, for you must have felt much the same when you also made the discovery. Was that freak of a tree which had marked the burial-place still standing ? I proceeded to search for it desperately. For hours I wandered to and fro, tip-toeing over garden walls, poking my head everywhere. No result. The tree had gone. Some scoundrel had chopped it down, and robbed me of a cool two thousand pounds. I never hated a man more. Even now I would give something to meet him. I'd take him by the throat, and—"

He paused, apparently speechless with indignation. Brown flushed, and looked at the floor intently. A triumphant expression crossed Powell's face. As it passed he said :

"The low thieving scoundrel ! Two thousand pounds at the very least ! "

"What's the use of talking like that ?" said Brown, with a sickly smile. "Probably the man's no more of a scoundrel than you are. Go on. You haven't yet informed me how you came to give yourself up."

"For years," continued Powell, "I had been thinking, hoping, and dreaming about the jewels, and the shock of losing them for ever unhinged my mind. I conceived a foolish idea. This was that as I had escaped from quod simply to get the jewels, I was

morally bound to go back again, now that I had failed in my object.

"The idea mastered me, and compelled obedience. I cast a last despairing glance round, and then set out. I had travelled to London like a tramp, but I returned in style. My theatrical friend had lent me a fiver, and I scattered it freely. Cabs, first-class railway ticket, tips to everybody. No one could have guessed who I was, or what I was going to do.

"The warders at the prison gates certainly did not. My swagger clothes and formidable beard and moustache so impressed them that they received me with quite a gratifying show of deference. I told them I had an important communication to make to the Governor, and was presently conducted to his room. Directly I was alone with him, I pulled off my beard and moustache, and said, 'Please, sir, I'm Convict 99, ready to resume duties.'

"That is all. My senses came back to me the next day, and I bitterly regretted what I had done. Too late! There I was at the sign of the broad arrow ; and there I remained for many weary months. Can you wonder that I long to meet the scoundrel who cut that tree down ? "

Again Brown flushed, and looked at the floor ; and again a triumphant expression crossed Powell's face.

"It's wrong to be so vindictive," said Brown, with another sickly smile. "As I remarked just now, probably the man's no more of a scoundrel than you yourself are."

"He robbed me of a couple of thousand pounds,"

said Powell doggedly. "Besides, he is responsible for my last two years' imprisonment. But for him, I should never have gone back."

"Still, better forgive and forget. I assure you that that's the right course, and I speak with some authority. I'm a deacon, you know."

"You a deacon?" cried Powell. "What chapel? The one near where we met?"

"That's it. I was appointed this very evening. A most exciting meeting. There was a new minister appointed as well."

Glad to divert the conversation from the tree and the jewels, Brown proceeded to describe in detail the recent events at Primrose Chapel.

"And so," he concluded, "the victory is complete. Mr. Cox is the minister, instead of Mr. Moon. I'm a deacon. The organist, who was practically the only supporter of Mr. Moon, has resigned. Yes, we've won all along the line."

"Truly an exciting meeting," commented Powell, who had listened with some amusement. "I didn't know there was so much fun to be got out of chapels. I think I must join one. Ah! I have it. Your organist has resigned. I'll take the place. I used to be pretty good at the organ, and two or three practices will put me in form again."

Brown frowned, and said: "You shouldn't jest on such subjects."

"I'm in earnest," retorted Powell.

"Kindly refrain from further observations on the point," said Brown, in a dignified manner. "We have something more serious to discuss. Here are you, a discharged convict wanting a fresh start in life; and

here am I, willing to give you one. Now what are we to decide on?"

"Appoint me organist, at an adequate salary," persisted Powell.

"In my opinion," continued Brown, dismissing the suggestion with a wave of his hand, "the colonies afford the best openings for a man in your position. Australia, for instance. Suppose I pay your passage out there, with something over to keep you going till you obtain work? How does that strike you?"

Powell leaned back in his chair and laughed derisively. Brown was indignant. His proposal implied a fairly large expenditure on his part, and ought, he considered, to have been received gratefully. True, he was influenced in making it by a desire to shake off Powell for good; but it was a generous proposal all the same.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," he said. "It seems to me that I'm acting very decently towards you. What's wrong with Australia? I'm convinced you'd get on well there, once you had settled down and become a little more thorough."

"A little more thorough?" said Powell, sitting up again. "Perhaps an advantage, and perhaps not. By the way, do you profess to be thorough in your own undertakings?"

"I do."

"Then why didn't you cut the whole of the tree down?" asked Powell, in quick, vicious tones. "Why did you leave the stump? Why didn't you remove that damning clue to your infamy? Why, I say, why?"

Brown shrank back, with a terrified look on his face. In truth, the stump of the curiously-shaped tree remained. He had spared it deliberately, because it would have been difficult to uproot, and because the idea that it might be identified had never occurred to him. What a fool he had been! His happy respectable life was over. He would have to join hands with Powell again. Not without a struggle, though.

"What—what do you mean?" he gasped.

"That you came out here directly you were free; that you found the tree standing; that you felled it on hearing of my escape; that afterwards you squared the chapel authorities, dug through the chapel floor, and got the jewels; that you sold them, and stuck to every sixpence of the proceeds; that while I've been eating husks you've been dining off fatted calf bought with my money."

"No, no, no!"

"You deny it?" cried Powell, jumping up, and making a threatening movement.

"Hear me out," said Brown. "I'll tell you all there is to tell. The tree was standing, and I did chop it down. But—"

"You scoundrel!" broke in Powell, with another threatening movement. "Two years, and more, have I been in prison because of you."

"I'm very sorry!"

"Oh, hang your apologies! I want something more substantial. Where's the money the jewels fetched? I don't leave this house till I have my share, with interest up to date. Where's the money, you frock-coated, hypocritical scoundrel?"

Brown stood up, with a sudden resoluteness of expression, and said :

"I won't endure this."

"Oh, indeed!" sneered Powell.

"No, I won't. I'm willing to talk with you as man to man, but I will not be bullied or insulted. If you go on in this way, I'll send for the police. Yes, whatever may be the consequences."

Powell hesitated for a moment or two, and then said :

"Very well. Now, as man to man, I ask you for an exact account of your dealings with the jewels. How much did you receive for them? Has Spottem claimed his share? Or is it half and half between you and me?"

"I've not touched them," replied Brown. "They're still under the chapel."

"You liar!" cried Powell passionately.

"Quietly, please," said Brown. "There's a servant girl in the house."

"Of course there is," said Powell, with a bitter laugh. "Two or three, perhaps. A man who robs his partners can afford to live in style."

Brown winced, but immediately afterwards drew himself up, and said boldly :

"I repeat that I've not touched them. Look here, I'm a deacon and a religious man, and I'm willing to take any oath you like to put to me that I've not. I assure you most solemnly that I believe them to be under the chapel at this very moment."

Powell looked at him searchingly. Was he speaking the truth? His voice and expression were both very earnest. Perhaps he was.

"I admit," continued Brown, "that at first I intended to get them. But there's a thick bed of concrete just below the floor, and—"

"How do you know that?" asked Powell suspiciously.

"The builder gave me the information. He was a friend of mine."

"What—the builder of the chapel?"

"Yes."

"You're playing with me," said Powell. "I will have the truth. Did the builder find them and share with you? How did you and he come to be friends? To what is your present prosperity due, if not to the jewels?"

"I will tell you the whole story," said Brown. "Sit down. It will take some time."

Briefly, but convincingly, he sketched his life from the day he stepped out of prison on ticket-of-leave. The meeting with Mr. Goodman; the appointment as confidential clerk; the felling of the tree with the meat chopper; the plans to dig up the jewels; their abandonment when the chapel began to charm; the steady progress in business; the death of Mr. Goodman; the inheritance from him of comparative wealth; the election to the diaconate of Primrose Chapel. All these he mentioned in their order.

Powell listened attentively, and decided to believe. Accordingly, when Brown had finished, he nodded his head, and said:

"I am satisfied."

"Thanks, thanks!" replied Brown. "I knew you would be in the end. I felt quite hurt, though, by the way you kept doubting my word."

"I think I had some reason for doing so," observed Powell coldly.

"Perhaps. However, that point's settled."

"Yes; and now—"

'One moment. I want to ask a question. How did you find out about that stump, and about my being at the chapel?"

"Chance, pure chance," replied Powell. "Having nothing else to do to-night, I walked in this direction. I was passing the chapel, when I heard cheers and clappings inside. Probably you or the new minister had just been appointed. At any rate, whatever was the cause of the sounds, I stopped to listen to them.

"While standing there I noticed the stump, and at once thought of our tree. I entered the chapel gate with a faint hope in my heart. Hurrying up to the stump, I examined it closely by the light of the lamp at the corner. The hope grew strong. The top of the stump was divided into three distinct natural parts, and in imagination I extended them and saw before me a whole trunk with eye-like openings.

"For some time afterwards I wandered about the neighbourhood, blaming myself for having missed the stump on my previous visit, and growing more and more convinced that it belonged to the tree. Twice I came back to look at it, and on the second occasion I received another surprise. You were leaving the chapel, in company with a man in clerical dress.

"I crept away and stationed myself at a little distance. Your appearance was prosperous, and the man you were with was presumably the minister of the chapel. This suggested to me the conclusions I mentioned just now, and, resolved to test them, I

joined you immediately you were alone. At the beginning of our talk I made some uncomplimentary remarks about the person who cut down the tree, and watched how you took them. Your manner showed me that the conclusions were correct."

Brown smiled and said :

"Correct so far as the tree was concerned, but not as to my having dug up the jewels."

"True," said Powell. "That remains to be done. Suppose we go round and have a try to-night?"

Brown's face became grave.

"We couldn't get inside the chapel," he said.
"The door's locked."

"Surely—"

"And even if we managed that, we couldn't dig them up with ordinary tools. They're ten feet down; and there's the concrete in between."

"Well, what do you propose?" asked Powell impatiently.

"That we don't trouble about them; that we leave them where they are."

"What! do you think that—"

"Hush! Hear me out!" said Brown. "The position's this : although I used to be a burglar, I'm now an honest, hard-working citizen, and I can't consent to soil my hands with stolen property. Besides, it would be quite impossible to carry out the digging operations without discovery. Besides, it's my duty as one of the deacons to—"

"Oh, shut up!" exclaimed Powell. "We've got to get them, and that's all about it. In what part of the chapel are they?"

"Twenty steps due north from the stump."

"Yes, yes ; but where's that ?"

"The corner of my pew," replied Brown. "I sit immediately over them every Sunday."

"Do you, though ! Ha, ha ! Trying to hatch them out, I suppose."

"Of course not, and you ought not to—"

"That's all right," said Powell. "Now, look here, we know just where they are, and what we have to decide is when and how we are to get them. I propose—"

"We'd much better let them alone," said Brown. "They're not ours, and we should both be sent back to prison if they were found on us."

"What's the use of your talking in this idiotic fashion ? My mind's made up."

"And so's mine, if it comes to that," said Brown, in sudden indignation. "They stay where they are."

"They don't !" shouted Powell. "I'll have them, even if I dig them up with my finger-nails. I'll burn your chapel down rather than lose them."

"Hush, hush ! Listen to me a moment."

"It's no use. Money's what I want, not words."

"I know. But how much ?"

"How much ?"

"Yes, how much would you take ?"

"For what ? For clearing out, and leaving the jewels ?"

"That's it. I'd gladly pay a fair sum to save trouble. What would satisfy you ?"

"Before I answer that question," said Powell, "I must put one to you. Have you heard anything of Spottem since you've been here ?"

"Not a word."

"H'm, dead perhaps. Those double-chinned chaps often go off early. In any case, though, I think we can leave him out of our calculations. Don't you?"

"Certainly. He deserves no consideration, after deserting us in the way he did."

"Well, leaving him out," said Powell, "we stand in on the jewels half and half. Roughly, that's three thousand pounds each. What will I take to forfeit my share? Two thousand. Yes, I'll knock off one and take two. Cash on the nail, of course."

"Two thousand!" cried Brown. "Why, it would ruin me! Two hundred is the very farthest I'll go."

"You suggest that seriously?"

"I do; and I regard it as a very handsome offer."

"And I as a gross insult. Two hundred pounds' indeed! Will that pay me for my years of penal servitude? Will it even pay for those caused by your treachery in cutting down the tree?"

"Still—"

"I've named my terms, and I won't move from them. If you'll pay me two thousand, I'll give up all claim to the jewels. If not, I'll get my share by fair means or foul. I swear I will."

Brown leaned his head on his hands, and thought. Should he try to raise the money? Should he sacrifice his principles, and work with Powell, or at any rate refrain from opposing him? Should he inform the police of the facts, in spite of the probability of his former criminal association with Powell thus becoming generally known, and wrecking his position at Primrose Chapel? It was hard to decide.

"Well," said Powell, after a short silence, "what is it to be?"

"I really can't make up my mind," replied Brown. "The thing's come upon me so suddenly, and there are such a lot of points to consider."

"You'd better join me," said Powell, changing his tone to one of persuasion. "The business is perfectly simple. We'd have them up and across to Amsterdam, without anyone even suspecting us."

Brown shook his head, and said :

"Some of the chapel people would be sure to look in while we were digging the hole."

"Oh, we'd arrange that all right."

"I tell you what," said Brown, after another short silence. "Give me a month. If by the end of it I've hit on a safe plan for getting them, I'll join you."

"Do nothing for a month!" exclaimed Powell. "Absurd! And yet—and yet I don't know."

He reflected for a moment or two, and then said :

"I've already waited six years for them, and I daresay I can wait a little longer. Yes, I'll give you the month. On two conditions, though."

"What are they?" asked Brown.

"The first is that you advance me some money, to be repaid when we sell the jewels. I'm so hard up that otherwise I might have to spend the month in the workhouse."

"Would ten pounds do?"

"Twenty would do better."

"Very well," said Brown, "you shall have that."

He at once prepared a cheque for the amount, and handed it to Powell.

"And now," he said, as Powell folded it and put it in his pocket, "what is the second condition?"

"That I'm made organist of Primrose Chapel."

"Impossible!"

"Oh, no, it's not. You told me there's a vacancy, and you can get me the appointment if you try. My playing's quite good enough."

"What do you want it for?"

"Surely you can guess," said Powell, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Haven't I consented to wait that month?"

"You have. But that doesn't affect the matter."

"Yes, it does. For all I know, you may intend to collar the jewels during the truce, and to bolt with the whole lot. If I'm organist, I can keep an eye on you and the chapel."

"I am pained by your suspicions," said Brown. "I pledge you my word as a deacon that they are unjust. I promise that—"

"Of course, of course," interrupted Powell. "Still, you must admit that, in the circumstances, it's only fair that I should be on the spot as well as you."

"But really there are strong objections to your proposal. You're not a member of the chapel, and you're not—not—oh! not quite a fit and proper person to play hymns and anthems."

"Nonsense!" said Powell. "The private life of an organist has nothing to do with his public one. Now, look here, Brown, I insist on your getting me the appointment."

"Suppose I can't?"

"But you can. Tell the minister I'm a friend of yours. Tell him I'll do the work for nothing. That'll fetch him."

Again Brown leaned his head on his hands, and thought. Perhaps he had better agree. If he did

not, Powell might make a reckless attempt on the jewels, with disastrous results. There was some excuse, too, for the proposal. His dishonourable action in cutting down the tree entitled Powell to refuse to trust him implicitly. Yes, perhaps he had better agree.

"You don't want it permanently?" he asked, lifting his head. "Only for the month?"

"That's all," replied Powell.

"And you're sure you'll be able to perform the duties satisfactorily?"

"Quite."

"Very well," said Brown resignedly, "I'll see the minister, and try to arrange things. And now, if you don't mind, we'll part for to-night. My house-keeper will be home shortly, and she might ask awkward questions about you."

"Oh, you could tell her I was your cousin from Australia, or something of that sort," said Powell, with a laugh. "However, good-bye! When can I see you again?"

"Here's my business address," said Brown, handing him a card. "Please call on me to-morrow morning."

Powell left the house, and after a moment's deliberation, turned towards the chapel, and walked there briskly. Under the lamp at the corner he stopped. First he read again the cheque and card Brown had given him, then he looked triumphantly at the tree stump and the chapel, and muttered :

"And the fool thinks I'm going to wait his convenience! Not much! The jewels shall be mine inside a couple of days—yes, all mine. His share shall compensate me for that extra bit of penal servitude I owed to him."

x

CHAPTER XI

MISS FLIFFY FLUFF

POWELL cashed Brown's cheque immediately the bank opened the next morning, and then started on a shopping expedition. His wardrobe was not particularly well-furnished, and his early purchases were articles of clothing. The later ones were hardly so innocent in character. They consisted of the ordinary tools used by burglars, and several others which he selected with special care. He was preparing for an attempt on the Fluffy Fluff jewels, and he had determined that neither the door of the chapel nor the concrete foundation should keep him from getting them.

He took everything to his lodgings, and, after locking up the tools and making some changes in his dress, went out again. First he had lunch, and then he called at Brown's office. Brown received him in a fairly friendly fashion ; but on his referring to the jewels, said :

"Please don't! That talk last night upset me terribly, and I couldn't stand another like it now. We shall have many more opportunities before the month's over."

"All right," said Powell. "As a matter of fact, I

really called about that organist business. To-day's Friday, and I ought to put in a practice this afternoon, if I'm going to play on Sunday. By the way, you've arranged with the minister that I'm to have the post?"

"Not yet. But I shall be seeing him in the evening, and I'll mention it then. He's sure to agree."

"Very well, I'd better have that practice at once. Can you come round with me?"

"I'm afraid I've got too much work to do. But you won't want me. Miss Summers, the chapel attendant, will let you in, and give you a list of the hymns and anthems for Sunday."

"Good! Where shall I find her?"

"Her house is next door to the chapel, on the left-hand side. I'll write a note to her for you, explaining who you are."

"Do you think she should know that?" asked Powell, with a laugh.

"Oh, I shan't explain everything," replied Brown, with a faint echo of a laugh. "I shall simply say that you're an acquaintance of mine who has kindly consented to assist us, pending the appointment of a permanent organist. Will that do?"

"Admirably."

Brown wrote the note in the terms he had indicated. After thanking him for it, Powell left. As he walked up the road he smiled once or twice. Affairs were very promising. Armed with the note, he would obtain peaceful possession of the chapel, and complete his plans. And then—well, time would show what then.

Half an hour later he stood outside Miss Summers' house. It was a small, one-storied building, separated from the chapel by a narrow path. The style of architecture was severely plain, but flowers and dainty curtains made the general effect pleasant.

"The old lady's got taste," he said to himself as he knocked. "The way she's arranged those windows does her credit."

By the old lady he meant the chapel attendant. He supposed, just as Brown had, that all such people were faded and elderly, and he expected to see someone of this sort when the door opened. Instead, he saw Miss Summers.

"What!" he cried, starting back.

"What!" cried Miss Summers.

For a few moments they looked at each other in speechless bewilderment. He was the first to recover. Lifting his hat, he said :

"This is a strange meeting."

"Are you really Dick Powell?" she asked.

"I am. And you—are you really Fluffy Fluff?"

"I am."

She spoke the truth. Miss Daisy Summers, the chapel attendant, had once been Miss Fluffy Fluff, the music-hall singer. Powell was face to face with the woman he had robbed half-a-dozen years before. As he realised this fully, and reflected that her jewels were only a few yards away, he muttered to himself the word "Extraordinary!"

"Yes, I am Fluffy Fluff," she went on excitedly. "But tell me, tell me! What brings you here? Where are my jewels? Have you come to return them? Tell me, quick!"

"I've come," he said, resuming with an effort his usual airy manner, "to see an old lady called Summers. I understood that this was her house."

"Summers!" she exclaimed. "That's my name."

"Yours!"

"Yes, yes. Fluffy Fluff and the other that you knew me by were my stage names. Daisy Summers is my proper private one. But I'm not an old lady."

Powell again muttered to himself the word "Extraordinary!" and then said aloud :

"Excuse me, but are you the attendant at the chapel next door?"

"Yes," she replied impatiently. "Why do you ask?"

"A thousand apologies!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know that you held the office. I used the expression old lady because I thought whoever did hold it would be sure to be one. A thousand apologies!"

"What do you mean?" she said, with a stamp of her foot. "Are you trying to insult me, after having stolen my jewels and made me a beggar?"

"No, no!" he protested. "Nothing is further from my thoughts."

"Well, what do you want with me? It's no use your saying you didn't know I was here. Coincidences of this sort don't happen except in novels. What do you want with me?"

"Upon my honour, I hadn't the slightest idea I should meet you. I was never more surprised in my life than when you opened the door. I called simply because I required the keys of the chapel."

"The keys of the chapel? Why?"

"I wish to practise on the organ," he replied.

"I'm to conduct the musical part of the services for a Sunday or two."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"I assure you that it is so," he said. "Mr. Brown, the deacon, informed me this morning that the old organist had resigned, and asked me to take on the duties till the appointment of a new one. I've a letter from him in my pocket, introducing me to you."

Her look changed to one of amusement.

"I'm inclined to believe you," she said. "But oh! it's funny. You organist and I attendant at the same chapel! Dick Powell, the burglar, and Fluffy Fluff, the music-hall singer! Oh! it's too funny for anything."

She laughed. He, too, laughed.

"But," she said, suddenly checking herself, "we mustn't stand here, acting like this. People passing by will wonder what's the matter. You'd better come inside for a minute or two."

"Thanks," he replied, "I shall be delighted to."

She led the way into the parlour, and they sat opposite each other. He had been considering what line he should take as to the jewels, and had just made up his mind. Accordingly he faced her cheerfully, ready for any questions she might ask.

"It is more than six years since our last meeting," she observed.

"And nearly twelve since our first one, when, you remember, I decided to write the song *A Little Piece of Fluff* for you."

"As long as that? Yes, I suppose it must be How time flies! Why, I'm turned thirty."

"You don't look it," he said. "Indeed, you

hardly seem a day older than when I did myself the honour of proposing marriage to you."

"And when," she added, with a smile, "I did myself the honour of refusing you?"

"Perhaps you were right," he said. "But I can't help thinking what a difference it would have made if you had accepted me. That unfortunate burglary wouldn't have happened; I shouldn't have had penal servitude; Spottem wouldn't now be living in luxury on the proceeds of your jewels."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I hoped—I hoped—"

"Yes?" he questioned sympathetically.

"I hoped that you had got them, or at any rate some of them, and that you would give them back to me."

"But surely you knew—"

"Oh, yes, I knew from the report of the trial that your partner Spottem escaped with the whole lot. But I thought that since your release you might have found him, and that—well, that he might have shared up with you."

Powell shook his head and said:

"I've not seen Spottem from the night of the burglary until the present time. Still, I've reasons for believing that I'm on his track. Yes, before very long I may have my hand on the jewels or the proceeds of them."

"Good!" she said excitedly. "Where is he? Can I help? Tell me everything."

Powell shrugged his shoulders, but did not speak.

"Quick!" she said. "What makes you think you're on his track?"

"My dear Fluffy," he replied, "is it likely that I

should give you the information? If you also were in possession of it, what would be the use of it to me?"

"You mean that when you find that scoundrel Spottem, you're going to stick to whatever you manage to get from him?"

"No," he replied emphatically. "You shall have a share; upon my honour you shall."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"You can trust me Fluffy," he said. "It pains me to see a woman of your charms and abilities a mere chapel attendant, and I shall be glad to do all that can be reasonably expected from me towards improving your position. So far I haven't received anything on account of the jewels, but immediately I do I will pay you a—"

She broke in on him with a shout of laughter.

"Oh, Dick, Dick, you're sublime!" she said, at the end of it. "Going to restore my fallen fortunes, are you? Going to do it out of my own property? Going to give with one hand what you stole with the other? Going to ask me to be grateful? Going to—"

"That'll do," he said, also laughing. "The situation is, I admit, a little odd. Still, please accept it. I assure you that I intend to consider your interests as well as my own. Trust me just a few days. I promise that you won't be disappointed."

"I don't understand—"

"We'll leave the subject for a bit," he said gently, but firmly. "At present I want to talk about you. What's been happening? Why've you dropped the music-hall work?"

"Because I had to," she replied resentfully. "It was your fault."

"Mine?"

"Yes, yours. I caught a bad chill through going out after you that night, and it spoiled my throat. I've not tried to sing in public since. My voice wouldn't travel farther than the second or third row."

"I'm very sorry! Truly it was a most unfortunate burglary. But how—how did you come to take on this line of life? I should have thought you'd have chosen something rather more thrilling."

"It's a long story," she replied. "All my savings were sunk in those jewels, and when I recovered from the illness I found myself a pauper. The people at the halls were very good, and got up a subscription list and a benefit performance, from which I received three or four hundred pounds. A nice little sum; but I was soon robbed of it. Your fault again."

"Hang it! I don't see that that's possible."

"It's true, though. Do you remember the ostler that chased you that night?"

"I should think I do. But for him and the policemen he picked up on the way, I should have escaped."

"Well, this wretched ostler sued me for £333 6s. 8d., on the ground that I had offered £500 reward for the capture of the three men concerned in the burglary, and that he was entitled to two-thirds of it for having captured two of them."

"Never!"

"I, of course, meant the £500 to be for the recovery of the jewels, and I'm almost certain that I said so. But he, the village policeman, and several others, all

swores that it was for the capture of the men ; and the Court believed them. The judgment was that I had made the offer, that the presence of witnesses constituted it a binding contract in the eyes of the law, and that therefore I must pay the amount claimed, with costs."

"And you paid ?" asked Powell, with a troubled expression on his face.

"Yes, I paid. And then—and then I did the silliest thing in my life. I was so tired, so broken down, so hopeless, that I took poison."

"My poor girl !" put in Powell. "Forgive me ! I assure you that that burglary wouldn't have occurred if I had foreseen all these unpleasant consequences. You can't imagine how much I regret them."

She nodded, and continued :

"I took the poison in a railway carriage. It was empty at the time, but an old gentleman got in just afterwards. He noticed that I was suffering, and spoke to me so kindly that I confessed all to him. I don't know exactly what happened then. I only remember that he helped me out of the carriage and into a waiting-room, that a doctor came and did something very uncomfortable to me, and that I was dreadfully ill.

"A week later I settled down here. The old gentleman was Mr. Goodman, the founder of the chapel, and the chief deacon. He acted most generously towards me, hushing up the poisoning business, helping me in money matters, and finally appointing me to this post. He's dead now, but I shall always feel grateful to him."

"And so shall I," said Powell. "Really, I'm very

sorry things have gone so badly with you. Really, too, I think that in a few days I shall be able to return to you a part of your lost property."

"I wish, Dick, you'd give me some particulars as to that. Where do you suppose this man Spottem who went off with the jewels is? And when do you suppose that you'll—"

"You must ask me another time," he replied, with a smile. "I want to have a look at that organ now. Do you mind lending me the chapel keys?"

"Then you're not joking about acting as the Primrose organist? I half thought you were."

"Never more serious. Mr. Brown was most urgent about it; said he didn't know anyone else he could ask; insisted on my consenting. By the way, I haven't shown you his letter of introduction yet. Here it is."

He handed the letter to her. She read it, and said:

"I see he calls you Powell. I wonder you haven't changed your name. Don't you find you are recognised as Powell the burglar?"

"Oh, no!" he replied. "There are lots of Powells knocking around, lots of Dick Powells even. Besides, people forget the names they read in police-court news."

"That's true. I wasn't sure of Spottem's till you mentioned it; and I certainly don't recollect your other partner's. What was it?"

Powell had been a little afraid that she might guess who Brown was from the fact that he was acquainted with him. Now his course was clear.

"His name?" he said. "Oh, he went under half-

a-dozen or more. I can't remember which he was using just then; might have been any of them. But what about my organ practice?"

"We'll get the keys, and go at once," she replied, jumping up. "No, it's five o'clock, and we may as well have a cup of tea first. What do you think?"

"I shall be delighted," he said, after a moment's hesitation. "It is ages since you and I have had tea together."

"Yes, ages. Excuse me while I see to the kettle."

They had tea, and afterwards smoked cigarettes, just as they used to when she was a music-hall star and he was writing her songs. His heart warmed to her. She had treated him wonderfully well considering the circumstances of their last meeting, and he would respond generously. He had already decided that she should have a part of the jewels when he dug them up, and now he fixed this part at a full half. Yes, he and she would divide them equally. Spottem and Brown did not matter. The former had disappeared, and the latter was well provided for as it was.

Once she showed some curiosity as to his acquaintanceship with Brown. He lied skilfully. The acquaintanceship was, he told her, a business one. He was employed by a firm of architects who designed the houses built by Brown, and in this way he frequently met him. He also told her that he had been out of prison on ticket-of-leave more than a year. She believed this; for she had not heard of his escape and subsequent surrender, and had, therefore, no reason for supposing that, as was the fact, he had had to serve the full term of his sentence.

Suddenly he crossed to the piano, sat down, and began to play. Miss Summers listened in silence for two or three bars, and then laughed nervously. He was playing *A Little Piece of Fluff*.

"You mustn't, you mustn't!" she said, putting a hand on his arm. "One of the deacons might pass, and hear. It would shock him terribly."

"Let it!" he replied recklessly. "Sing, Fluffy, sing!"

"No, no! I haven't for years."

"All the more reason for doing so now."

"But I can't, Dick—I really can't!"

"Try—for the sake of the old times."

Again she laughed nervously. Then she said: "I'll try—for the fun of the thing."

He continued to play. She took up the song, in a voice which began at hardly more than a whisper, but which gradually grew full and firm. During the second verse he smiled appreciatively, and at the end he said:

"Very good! Now then, let it go for all you're worth."

She nodded, and attacked the third verse, which was the last one, with great strength and spirit. The refrain was:

"Oh, I am a little piece of fluff,
A sweet little, neat little piece of fluff,
And I do not care a pin,
And to kiss is not a sin
In a bad little, mad little piece of fluff,
A hokey-pokey, good-for-a-jokie, naughty little
piece of fluff,
Of fluffy fluffy, fluffy fluffy, fluffy fluffy fluff."

It was in dance time, and as she sang it she danced to and fro in front of the piano, possessed by a wild fancy. Again she was on the stage of the Oxford, with a thousand faces turned towards her; again joy and triumph made her heart beat fast and her blood run hot. So real seemed the fancy that, as she finished, she bowed in expectation of the usual applause. None came. She raised her head and saw the empty chairs, and the pictures on the opposite wall of the room. And suddenly the fancy fled, and left her weak and cold.

"Fluffy!" exclaimed Powell, "your voice is better than ever. You must return to the halls, my girl."

She shivered, and stared at him vacantly.

"What's the matter?" he asked, jumping up.

"Nothing," she replied, her eyes filling with tears.

"But there is," he persisted. "You're crying."

"I'm well enough," she said, with an effort. "Come on. You shall have your organ practice now."

She got the keys, led the way to the chapel, and entered it, closely followed by Powell.

"There you are," she said, pointing to the organ. "It's one of those hydraulic things, and you won't want a man to blow it for you. This is the list of music for next Sunday. I'll look in later on."

"The excitement was too much for her," he soliloquised, as she hurried out again. "Still, I'm glad I got her to sing. Whatever may have been wrong with her voice, it's all right now."

For the next hour he sat at the organ, playing the hymns and anthems on the list she had given him. Then he descended to the floor, went to one of the windows, and peered out. The tree stump, for which

he was looking, was directly in front of him. When he had located it, he estimated the number of paces from it to where he stood, and afterwards stepped due north across the chapel until he made the number up to twenty. This brought him to the corner of a pew, on the ledge of which was a label inscribed with the words, "James Brown." He was satisfied. The spot was that which Brown had named as immediately over the jewels.

Hardly had he done this, and noted the position of the pew, than Miss Summers entered. He advanced to meet her. She had recovered from her recent emotion, and said to him cheerfully :

" Well, Dick, you've been making a lot of noise. Have you finished ? "

" Quite," he replied. " Ready to smoke another cigarette with you now."

They walked out of the chapel together, she first turning off the gas.

" Here, you go on ! " he exclaimed, as she stopped to lock the door. " I'll do that for you."

" Thanks," she said, allowing him to take the keys. " Be careful, though."

While she proceeded towards her house, he closed, locked, and then swiftly unlocked both the door and the gate.

" All right ? " she asked, as he ran up to her.

" Oh, yes ! " he replied, handing her the keys.

They went into the house again, and talked for some time, principally about the extraordinary restoration of her voice, and the possibilities of fresh music-hall successes. At ten they said good-bye. He stood outside the chapel a few moments, and then walked

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away. At midnight he returned, however, carrying a large carpet-bag in which were a burglar's lantern and the tools he had bought in the morning. The jewels had been buried long enough. He was determined that they should sparkle in the light of the next dawn.

The gate and door were still unlocked, and after making sure that he was unobserved, he passed inside, carefully closing them behind him. With the aid of the lantern, which he now lit, he found Brown's pew. The task to be performed was a heavy one, and there was no time to spare. Accordingly, he at once took a saw from the carpet-bag, greased it, and knelt down on the floor.

CHAPTER XII

THE POLICEMAN AND THE CARPET-BAG

AT about the time Miss Summers was singing *A Little Piece of Fluff* to an accompaniment by Powell, Brown called on Mr. Cox. He found him in, and for several hours they sat talking of Primrose Chapel. The subject was very interesting to both of them, for one intended to be a model deacon and the other a model minister. They reviewed the chapel's career; they examined the totals of its members, Sunday school children, and district visitors; they criticised the order of its services; they discussed ways and means of increasing its prosperity and usefulness. In fact, as Mr. Cox expressed it, being two new brooms, they surveyed the ground carefully before beginning to sweep.

But throughout the evening the mind of each was vexed by secret thoughts. In the case of Brown, they were due to Powell's demand that the jewels be dug up. Could this be done without a scandal? That was the question. In the case of Mr. Cox, they were due to his recognition of Brown as his partner in the days when he was Bill Spottem, the burglar, and to his curiosity as to the fate of the jewels. Had Brown really got them? Should he

ask him? If so, for his own benefit or for Fliffy Fluff's?

It was nearly midnight when Brown rose to go. As he buttoned his coat, he said :

"Just one thing more. Now that Miss Grass has resigned, we want an organist."

"True," said Mr. Cox. "I forgot that."

"But I remembered it," said Brown, with a business-like air. "I saw a man this very morning in the matter. He didn't care about undertaking the duties permanently, but was willing to do so until we could secure someone else. I accepted his offer and sent him round to the chapel at once to practise Sunday's music. You've no objection?"

"Of course not. It was very kind of him to consent, and of you to think of asking him. Otherwise we might have been completely stranded."

"Well, good-bye," said Brown, smiling at the ease with which Powell's appointment as temporary organist had been arranged.

"Good-bye," repeated Mr. Cox, and then added, "No, it shan't be good-bye yet. I'll walk with you a bit."

They went down the road together. Mr. Cox was silent and thoughtful. He had not come out simply for exercise and fresh air before going to bed. Brown's devotion to their joint work, as instanced by his promptness in settling the difficulty about the organ, had so touched him that he had decided to inform him before they parted of his identity with Bill Spottem. As two earnest and right living men, they would doubtless be able to find some honourable solution to the problem of the jewels.

Primrose Chapel lay about half-way between Mr. Cox's house and Brown's, and when they were almost up to it, Brown said :

"I really don't like bringing you any farther."

Mr. Cox felt that the moment to make himself known had arrived. Taking Brown's arm, he said :

"Before we separate, I have something important to tell you. To-day I am the Rev. William Cox, but once I was—"

He stopped speaking. They were now level with the chapel, and he heard the sound of a heavy fall inside.

"What was that?" he asked.

Brown did not reply. He also had heard the sound, and he guessed instinctively that it was caused by Powell. He was right. They had come up just as he was kneeling to saw through the floor. In doing so, he had accidentally knocked the bag containing his tools off the seat on which he had placed it.

"Listen!" whispered Mr. Cox, stepping towards the gate. "I'm certain there's someone in the chapel."

Still Brown did not speak. But by now he was convinced that Powell was there, and he bit his lip in rage at him, and at himself for having trusted him.

Mr. Cox turned the handle of the gate quietly, and said :

"It's unlocked."

Brown suddenly realised that there was a chance of saving the situation. Powell was a man of resource, and might be able to invent some plausible explanation of his intrusion, if only he understood in time by whom he was discovered.

"What's to be done?" whispered Mr. Cox. "I'm on for going in, if you are."

"All right!" said Brown.

Followed by Mr. Cox, he ran past the gate and on to the chapel. Beating against the door, he cried:

"Who's there? Who's there?"

"Hush!" said Mr. Cox. "This is probably unlocked as well."

Still keeping in front, Brown turned the handle and opened the door. Stepping inside, he said loudly:

"Stop where you are, Mr. Cox. I'll light the gas. We'll soon see then who it is."

As he finished, a voice came out of the darkness before him. It was Powell's, and said:

"Is that you, Mr. Brown? Most extraordinary thing. Sat down after practising on the organ, and fell fast asleep. Only woke a minute ago. Don't trouble about the gas. I'll be with you directly."

Brown was immensely relieved. His warning had had the effect intended. The explanation given by Powell ought to be sufficient if he himself backed it up properly. Turning to Mr. Cox, he said:

"Why, it's Mr. Powell, the gentleman I told you about, who's so kindly consented to act as organist."

Mr. Cox leaned against the wall and laughed. He recognised Powell's voice and name; and the idea of the old firm of Powell, Brown & Spottem, Burglars, having become organist, deacon, and minister respectively of the same chapel, appealed strongly to his sense of humour.

"Ah, here you are!" exclaimed Brown, as Powell

stepped up to them at the open door, the carpet-bag in his hand. "Let me introduce you. The Rev. William Cox—Mr. Powell."

The light of the lamp at the corner of the road shone on the group. As Mr. Cox bowed to Powell, he recognised his features, just as he had his voice and name, and again laughed. Then, in a mixture of rashness and prudence, he said :

"Pardon my going on like this! But really it's funny. When I heard a noise inside, I fully expected to find a burglar packing up the collection plates. Behold, I find my organist instead! Ha, ha! Ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha!" cried Powell. "True; very funny!"

"Very funny!" echoed Brown. "Ha, ha!"

For some moments they stood together, all three laughing heartily, although not all for the same reason. Then Powell said :

"I suppose I had better get Miss Summers, the attendant, to lock up now?"

"Yes," replied Brown. "She ought to have done so hours ago."

"She'd have robbed me of a very comfortable sleep if she had," said Powell. "But seriously, I expect she's forgotten and gone to bed. I'll knock her up. Don't you two wait, though. I can manage that all right."

"Here she is!" exclaimed Mr. Cox.

Brown and Powell turned, and saw Miss Summers entering the gate. She had heard the clamour at the chapel door, and had come out to learn what it meant. As on the night of the burglary, excitement and haste had made her careless of appear-

ances. Again she was clad in a dressing-gown and slippers, with her hair loose on her shoulders.

"What—what's the matter?" she asked, as she joined them, and the four principals in the affair of the Fluffy Fluff jewels were together for the first time in their lives.

Powell was perplexed. He could not give her the explanation that had served with the others, and he could not give her a different one before them. His perplexity was soon ended, however.

"What's the matter?" she repeated.

"Oh, nothing serious," replied Mr. Cox. "Mr. Powell will tell you. As for me, I'm afraid I must go now. It's getting late. Good-night, Miss Summers! Good-night, gentlemen!"

Raising his hat, he walked away. He had accepted Powell's explanation as correct, and had no suspicion of the real cause of the incident. The reason for his sudden departure was simply that the idea of the three burglars being all office-holders at Primrose Chapel was still tickling him, and that he wished to be by himself in order to be able to laugh freely. Brown did not, of course, know this, and hurried after him, thinking that a more ceremonious farewell might be advantageous in the circumstances.

"I'm awfully sorry you've had to come out," said Powell to Miss Summers, directly they were alone. "Did you bring the keys with you?"

"Yes," she replied, producing them from a pocket in her dressing-gown. "But what on earth does it all mean?"

"I'll call in and tell you in the morning," he said, taking them from her and locking the door. "You

must go back to bed now. You'll catch another cold if you don't, and lose your voice again."

"Nonsense! I want to know immediately."

By this time they had reached the gate. He locked that also, and gave her the keys. Then he glanced up the road, and saw Brown and Mr. Cox a few yards away parting from each other, and then dropped his carpet-bag and took her arm.

"Quick, Fliffy! Think of your voice!" he said, leading her towards her house. "There's nothing to tell, except this. I left some important papers in the chapel; remembered them; returned; found I hadn't closed the chapel properly; went in. Mr. Brown and Mr. Cox chanced to be passing; heard me; raised an alarm. That's all—absolutely all. I'm to blame. I oughtn't to have left the papers, and I oughtn't to have been so careless in closing the chapel for you. Very sorry. Ah! here we are at your door. Do, please, run in out of the cold. Thanks! Pleasant dreams! Good-bye!"

She entered the house, although not quite satisfied with his explanation. When she had done so, he turned and hurried back to the chapel gate. He had been gone only a little time, but during it important things had happened. After parting from Mr. Cox, Brown noticed Powell's carpet-bag, opened it, and looked inside. As he closed it again, a policeman came round the corner. Seeing him, Brown stepped in front of the bag, in instinctive protection of the criminal tools which he now knew it contained. His action at once aroused the suspicions of the policeman, who was a young and energetic member of the force. Accordingly, when Powell

reached the gate, he found the two engaged in conversation.

"Well, at any rate," he heard the policeman say, in reply to a remark by Brown, "I want to be informed what you're loitering about here for at this time of night."

Powell saw that Brown was in a very embarrassed state, and promptly intervened.

"Are you drunk, officer?" he said sternly. "What do you mean by talking to this gentleman in that way? Loitering about, indeed! What do you take him for?"

The policeman, impressed by his manner and his well-groomed appearance, said hesitatingly:

"I thought it my duty, sir, to—"

"Your duty," broke in Powell, "is to protect respectable people, not to molest them. This gentleman has been waiting for me. He's a friend of mine. More than that, he's one of the deacons of this chapel."

"Yes," said Brown, who was recovering from his embarrassment, "everybody in the neighbourhood knows me."

"Still, all the same—" began the policeman.

"Give him your card, Mr. Brown," said Powell impatiently. "Perhaps that will satisfy him."

"And now," he continued, as Brown produced a card and handed it to the policeman, "we'll go on. Don't forget your bag. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting so long."

Accepting the situation, Brown picked up the bag as if it had been his. The policeman fingered the card and said to him :

"I suppose it's all right. But what—what have you got inside there?"

"Officer, this is beyond endurance," said Powell indignantly. "What's it to do with you what my friend's bag contains? Do you think he's a burglar, with a supply of jemmies and picklocks? If you take my advice, Mr. Brown, you'll report the insolent fellow."

"I shall do so the first thing in the morning," said Brown, with a desperate boldness; "71 is his number, isn't it?"

"Yes, 71," replied Powell. "We'll see his superintendent together. Officer, you'll regret this!"

"I only meant to do my duty, sir, and if—" began the policeman.

"Not another word," said Powell, taking Brown's arm and walking away with him. "You can consider yourself reported."

They proceeded in silence for a few yards. Then Brown looked over his shoulder and muttered:

"Thank Heaven!"

"What for?" asked Powell.

"That he's not following us. I was afraid he might be."

"I wasn't," said Powell, with a laugh. "The youngster's bluffed right out of time. Ah, it was rare! Did you hear me call him an insolent fellow? Not often people in our line say that to a policeman with impunity. By the way, what set him on to you?"

"Oh, I'd glanced into this wretched bag of yours just before he came up, and the sight of him flustered me a bit, and he, of course, noticed that."

"Then you know what the bag contains?" said Powell, after a short silence, "and why I was in the chapel?"

"Yes," replied Brown coldly, "I know."

"Perhaps it's as well," said Powell, with a shrug of his shoulders. "It simplifies matters."

They did not speak again until, as they reached Brown's house, Powell said :

"I suppose I come in with you?"

Brown nodded, and opened the door with a latch-key. Then motioning Powell into the front parlour, in which a gas jet was burning, he said :

"Sit down, please. I'll be with you directly."

Not waiting for a reply, he hurried up the stairs, still carrying the carpet-bag. He was without it, however, when he entered the parlour a few moments later. Powell noticed this, and said :

"What have you done with that little outfit of mine?"

"Put it under lock and key."

"Oh, indeed!"

"Yes, indeed!" retorted Brown angrily. "Nice mess it nearly got me into just now. There was I, a respectable citizen and a deacon of a high-class chapel, on the verge of being arrested for having felonious tools in my possession."

"You're right about that," said Powell. "If I hadn't come up when I did, you'd have been run in for a dead cert. I hope you're grateful to me."

"Grateful?"

"Yes, grateful!"

Brown laughed bitterly, and said: "Very well, we'll agree that I'm grateful."

"And having done that, we'll talk about those jewels," said Powell. "I admit that this attempt of mine on them was not quite honourable. Still, it only makes me quits with you for cutting down that tree. Besides, it wasn't a successful attempt."

"Of course it wasn't! The tools you had could never have got through the bed of concrete under the chapel."

"They didn't get so far as that," said Powell, with a smile. "You and your Mr. Cox found me before I'd actually started work."

"Is that true?" asked Brown eagerly.

"Absolutely! The chapel's just as it was when I went in. Not even a scratch on the floor."

"Good!" said Brown, with a sigh of relief. "I was almost afraid to question you as to that. I thought you might have hacked the place about a bit, which would have been awkward to explain to people. But, as it is, the matter's probably ended. I don't think Mr. Cox suspected anything. Do you?"

The beard, the spectacles, the clerical dress, and the change of voice, had effectually concealed from Powell Mr. Cox's identity with Bill Spottem, and he replied :

"I'm sure he didn't. He seems a delightfully simple-minded chap. How he laughed at the idea of having mistaken me for a burglar! No, there's no danger from him. Even if he noticed my bag, he doubtless supposed that it contained hymn-books or something equally innocent."

"Yes," said Brown, with another sigh of relief, "the matter's ended."

"On the contrary," said Powell pleasantly, "it's only just beginning to be interesting."

"What do you mean?"

"That before we part to-night, we're going to decide how to get the jewels. There's no need for you to frown and shake your head like that. I don't want trouble with the police or the chapel people any more than you do; and if we put our heads together for a few minutes we shall hit on a safe enough plan."

"But—but—the jewels don't belong to us."

"Oh, indeed! Then to whom do they belong?"

"Why, to Miss Fluffy Fluff, the original owner, of course. Now look here, Powell, I don't want her property, and you oughtn't to either. Won't you agree to let them stay where they are? Please do! We're not entitled to them, and they would only demoralise us if we got them."

Powell meditated on this a little time, and then observed:

"It's a fine thing to be honest."

"It is," said Brown, with an appreciative nod.

"And," continued Powell benevolently, "I'm going to give you the chance to be remarkably honest. You think the jewels belong to Miss Fluffy Fluff. Very well, my boy. You and I will dig them up and share them, and you shall hand over your half to her. How does that suit you?"

Brown was staggered by the proposal.

"But—but—" he stammered, "I don't know where she is. She hasn't been singing at the music halls for ever so long. I shouldn't be surprised if she's dead or gone abroad."

"Oh, no; she's alive, and in London. I've seen

her within the past week, and will introduce you to her directly you are ready to hand them over."

"Perhaps she's better without them. Perhaps they'd only demoralise her as they would you or me."

Powell assumed a pathetic expression, and said :

"They'd lift her out of a life of dulness and servitude. The poor girl has fallen on evil days. She works very hard, receives but a scanty wage, and is very unhappy. Your duty, as a respectable citizen and a deacon of a high-class chapel, is clear. You must give her your half."

"And what about yours?" demanded Brown.

"The circumstances in my case are different. As I told you years ago, I started Miss Fluffy Fluff on her music-hall career, and it is therefore fitting that she and I should share the proceeds of that career."

"But—"

"There is no 'but' about it. You must let her have your half. She is entitled to it, and she needs it. You cannot, consistently with the principles you profess, keep it from her any longer. Think of the poor girl struggling wearily with poverty! Think of yourself, in a frock-coat and clean shirt, callously sitting every Sunday on thousands' of pounds worth of property belonging to her!"

Brown felt that he was cornered, and said : "How can we dig them up safely?"

"Good!" cried Powell enthusiastically. "That's the way to talk!"

"And that's not," said Brown sullenly. "Mrs. Kronk, my housekeeper, sleeps in the room overhead, and you'll wake her if you shout like that."

"All right!" replied Powell, more quietly. "And

now, as you say, how can we dig them up safely? Let's both think."

After a short silence, Brown exclaimed in despairing tones :

"It's too risky! Oh, I wish it hadn't to be done! The chapel's getting on so well under Mr. Cox. New members are joining every week. At some of the recent services there have been more people than seats. And all this prosperity will end if we cause a scandal, as we probably shall."

Suddenly Powell jumped up in great excitement.

"Got it!" he cried. "Got it!"

"What?" asked Brown.

"A safe—an absolutely safe plan. I understand from what you say that sometimes the chapel building is too small—that sometimes all the congregation can't be seated. Is that so?"

"It is."

"Then that sometimes shall become always. You and I will work up the chapel to even greater prosperity than at present. At every service the building shall be too small, and people shall have to stand up or go away. And directly this overflowing stage is reached, we'll strike for the jewels. A larger building, we'll tell the members, must be erected. On the same site? No, that isn't extensive enough. A new building and a new site. This arranged, you perceive what follows? We buy the old property at a knock-down valuation, and dig up the jewels. Isn't it a splendid plan? What do you think of it? Honestly, Brown, what do you think of it?"

"I like it," replied Brown warmly. "We should attain our object without running any risk. Instead

of injuring the chapel, we should do it good. But—but—”

“Yes?”

“But would the plan succeed? I believe that, with Mr. Cox continuing his admirable sermons, and with earnest efforts on our part, the overflowing stage would be easily reached. I’m not sure, though, whether, even then, the members would agree to the proposed change.”

“Of course they would! A few might object on sentimental grounds to giving up the old home, but the great majority would feel that it was their duty to take the tide at the flood, and lead Primrose Chapel on to fortune.”

“H’m! probably you’re right,” said Brown musingly.

“I’m certain I am,” replied Powell. “I’ve never been more pleased with a plan in my life. It’s safe, yet daring; simple, yet clever. Shall we decide on it, or can you hit on a better? There’s no hurry. Just think the matter over for a minute or two.”

Brown soon made up his mind. Indeed, although not quite so sanguine as Powell about success, he was as eager to adopt the plan. It had the great advantage in his eyes of postponing for a time any direct action with regard to the jewels. Besides, it added special interest to his work at Primrose Chapel. The present building was undoubtedly small, and the removal to a larger one seemed warranted both by the promise of Mr. Cox’s ministry and by the steady growth of the neighbourhood. True, there was the question of expense. That, however, would be easily settled if the chapel members were united and willing.

"Well?" questioned Powell.

"I'm with you," replied Brown. "On one condition."

"And that is?"

"That you swear that until the plan has been fully tried you won't make any attempt on the jewels."

"I swear it most solemnly. They shall be undisturbed; upon my honour, they shall. I won't even ask you to return those tools you have of mine. You shall keep them as a guarantee of good faith."

"Although not necessarily for publication?" added Brown, with a lightness unusual in him.

"Decidedly not!"

They looked at each other pleasantly. Brown remembered an incident that had happened in that very parlour a month before. The circumstances were similar. Should he act as Mrs. Kronk had acted, with the substitution of whisky for the red currant wine? Yes, he would.

"Now that we've arrived at this friendly arrangement," he remarked, with a smile, "I think we might have a drink together. Don't you?"

"I do," replied Powell. "I was beginning to be afraid you had turned teetotaller."

Brown mixed two glasses of whisky and water, and then said:

"A toast! If things go as I hope they will, we'll bring our proposal before the next Primrose Chapel general meeting. The toast is: Success to us then."

Powell nodded; and they raised their glasses, with the words:

"Success to us at the next Primrose Chapel general meeting."

CHAPTER XIII

A VOTE OF THANKS

ON the afternoon of the same day Powell had another talk with Brown. During it he learned that the next ordinary Primrose Chapel general meeting would be held in about three months' time. He had not anticipated that it would be quite so far ahead ; but Brown persuaded him that it would be better to delay submitting their proposal until then, rather than to summon a special meeting for the purpose at an earlier date. Accordingly, he settled down fairly cheerfully to three months' chapel life.

The position of the principals in the affair of the Fluffy Fluff jewels with regard to knowledge of the identity of each other and of the whereabouts of the jewels was curious. Mr. Cox knew Powell and Brown, but not Miss Summers. Powell knew Brown and Miss Summers, but not Mr. Cox. Brown knew Powell, but not Miss Summers and Mr. Cox. Miss Summers knew Powell, but not Brown and Mr. Cox. Brown and Powell knew that the jewels were under the chapel ; Mr. Cox and Miss Summers did not. No change took place during the three months. Mr. Cox was often on the point of disclosing to Powell and Brown his identity with Bill Spottem, but for various

reasons never actually did so. Miss Summers and Powell were by mutual consent silent as to their past association with the music-hall and burgling professions. Brown's public appearances were always simply in the character of respectable citizen and deacon.

But although in this respect their position remained the same, in others it did not. Powell and Brown threw themselves with great energy into the work of promoting the prosperity of Primrose Chapel. They were splendidly supported by Mr. Cox, who was even more enthusiastic and earnest as the permanent minister than he had been as the temporary one. Miss Summers also joined in the work, doing at Powell's persuasion many things outside her ordinary duties as attendant. In fact, the chapel life brought all four much together, and soon established a general friendly relationship between them.

Powell's methods were very practical. For instance, he frequently went into the highways and hedges to gather in people. To a casual acquaintance he would say something like this: "Look here, I want you to come to Primrose Chapel next Sunday. . . . A wide-awake place, under entirely new management, and going very strong. . . . I'm the organist. . . . The minister's a friend of mine, and always worth hearing. . . . Here's the address. . . . Don't fail to come!" And very often his appeal was successful, the man to whom it was addressed coming himself, and perhaps bringing someone else as well.

There was a Primrose Mutual Improvement

Society, and also a Primrose Band of Hope. Powell took an active interest in both, and by personal influence and eloquent addresses on culture and temperance succeeded in improving the attendance. Another method was a series of popular concerts which he gave in the Sunday School room. They were not particularly good; but they pleased the people who sang and played at them, and, in a less degree, those who listened; and they consequently helped the general progress of the chapel. Incidentally, too, they secured for Powell the reputation of being a humourist. To one of them he contributed, for the sake of novelty, a solo on the big drum, and afterwards apologised for the faultiness of the performance on the ground that he was suffering from a sore throat. The audience laughed immoderately, both at the solo and at the absurdity of the apology. So far as they were concerned, sad and strange though it may seem, Powell was henceforth a humourist of a very high order.

At last the three months passed. For several Sundays the chapel had been packed at every service. Members arriving late had found their pews occupied, and had been obliged to stand at the back, or sit on chairs placed along the aisles, or even go away. This, and diplomatic remarks by Powell and Brown, had caused the idea of removal to be talked about among the congregation, and to be supported by many. Now had come the time to propose the definite scheme for the purchase of the present building by Brown, and the erection of a larger one on another site. The two conspirators were sanguine of carrying it through.

It had occurred to both of them long before this that the adoption of the scheme would not give them immediate possession of the old building, as it would be wanted until the new one was ready. They had, however, hit on a way of attaining their object without further delay. As soon as the removal had been decided upon, Brown would be asked to name the price he was willing to pay for the old building. He would reply that he would like first to examine the foundations, to see whether they would be of use to him when he came to put houses on the site, as that point somewhat affected the question of value. Permission would be granted by his co-deacons and the minister, as a matter of course. The pretext he had advanced would then enable him and Powell to dig up the jewels without exciting suspicion.

The general meeting duly opened. Mr. Cox was in the president's chair. Brown and Powell, who had left the organ after playing a voluntary, were seated together over the jewels. A few pews away were Mrs. Kronk and Miss Summers. Just behind these two was Miss Minerva Grass, who, although no longer the organist, was still a member of the chapel. Her reason for remaining one was her affectionate interest in the Rev. Marmaduke Moon. She held, in fact, a sort of watching brief for him. He had confided to her that in spite of what had happened he would like to be back at Primrose Chapel as minister, and she was seeking a favourable opportunity to advocate his restoration. So far she had not found one, but she had not yet abandoned hope.

As in the case of the previous general meeting, so now the agenda paper contained an entry to the

effect that Brown was to bring forward a matter of importance, and to ask for an expression of opinion thereon. When this was reached, and he rose to speak, everybody faced towards him. Only Powell knew what he was about to say. The rest, remembering the nature of his former matter of importance, waited with much curiosity to hear what new surprise he had in store for them.

He began by congratulating his audience on the progress the chapel had made during the last few months. With Powell's assistance, he had prepared a table of the present numbers of chapel members, Sunday School and Band of Hope children, mutual improvers, and tract distributors, and the corresponding numbers at the beginning of Mr. Cox's administration. He read this out, and showed that in every department there had been a great advance. Then he referred to the difficulty that had been experienced in providing seats for all attending the recent Sunday services. He had been pained, he said, to see men, women, and even children, obliged to stand up, or else to go away and lose the benefits of Mr. Cox's teaching altogether. It did not seem to him right. He thought, and he hoped the meeting as a whole thought, that something should be done to obviate the difficulty.

"Hear, hear!" cried several sympathetically, as he paused for a moment.

Encouraged by this, and by a whispered "Go it!" from Powell, he at once passed on to the removal scheme. The meeting agreed with him, he said, that something was to be done. But what? Was Mr. Cox to reduce the quality of his sermons, and

consequently the demand for seats? No, a thousand times no! Let him preach better and better, and let his flock grow more and more numerous. That flock must, however, be accommodated comfortably. How? By extending the existing building? Alas! there was no vacant land adjoining it; houses shut it in on every side. But within half a mile there were two or three magnificent sites, one of which could be secured at a moderate cost. That was the way out of the difficulty. He submitted to the meeting, as a resolution, that the present property should be sold, and that a new building of a larger size should be erected on another site. This concluded his speech. He had given much thought to it, and it was an able piece of work. So vigorous was the applause as he sat down, that he felt the victory was practically won.

Immediately the applause had subsided, Powell jumped up. Briefly, but effectively, he seconded the resolution. Mr. Brown's views were, he said, his own. As good, earnest people striving to do their duty, the members of Primrose Chapel had no choice in the matter. They must decide in favour of the change, and decide that very day. Perhaps the minds of some of them were exercised by considerations of expense? He would bid any such take courage. The expenditure would undoubtedly be heavy, but there need be no hesitation on that account. As the nucleus of a fund they would have the proceeds of the present property, an advantageous sale of which could be effected without delay, Mr. Brown being, he understood, willing to purchase at the utmost market value. To this were to be added the subscriptions of

members and friends. He himself would give a hundred pounds, and he was convinced that directly the scheme was approved, money would positively pour in. He urged them most strongly to vote for the resolution. The minister and deacons, as trustees of the chapel, could then at once invite subscriptions, negotiate for the sale of the old building, inspect possible sites for the new one, and otherwise put things in train.

This was applauded even more vigorously than the previous speech had been, Powell's promise of a hundred pounds arousing general enthusiasm. Brown, however, was alarmed by it. He felt that Powell, whom he had been financing during the past three months, might expect him to pay the hundred. Accordingly he whispered :

"I say, you know, that's rather a big subscription."

"Don't worry yourself," replied Powell, perceiving his meaning. "I shan't ask you for it. I mean to provide it out of the jewels, as a thank-offering. We've as good as got them. Hullo! though ; Mr. Cox doesn't seem very happy. I hope he isn't going to oppose us."

They both looked at him. He was nursing his chin in his hand, and frowning deeply. Something was evidently causing him anxious thought.

"I'm afraid he is," continued Powell. "Still, we'll win him over all right."

He would not have been so sanguine of this if he could have read Mr. Cox's mind. Why were the two ex-burglars, Powell and Brown, the two people out of the whole congregation to propose the removal to a new building ? Why was Powell willing to sub-

scribe so munificently? Why was Brown to be the purchaser of the old building? These questions had occurred to Mr. Cox during Powell's speech, and in considering them he had stumbled on to the truth as to the whereabouts of the Fluffy Fluff jewels. His theory that Mr. Goodman and Brown had dug them up and shared them was wrong. They were under Primrose Chapel. The present action of Powell and Brown was conclusive on the point. So was that midnight alarm at the chapel months ago. Then he had believed the presence of Powell and his carpet-bag to be quite harmless; now he knew its real meaning. Yes, the jewels were under Primrose Chapel, and Powell and Brown were making a determined effort to get them. Were they to be allowed to succeed? No; he, their old partner Bill Spottem, would defeat them.

All this passed through Mr. Cox's mind within less than a minute from the end of Powell's speech. But during that time his preoccupation had been generally observed; and just as he had arrived at his decision, Mr. Lambert got up, and said:

"My wife and I are much interested in the resolution so ably put by our friends and co-workers, Mr. Brown and Mr. Powell. We both have at heart the honour and glory of Primrose Chapel, which would presumably be enhanced by the contemplated change, and we have both been inconvenienced by the recent overcrowding. But before the matter goes any farther, Mr. Cox, we should like to hear your views, as the minister of the congregation and the principal cause of its present prosperity."

"Hear, hear!" cried many.

Mr. Cox stepped to the front of the platform, cleared his throat, and said :

" Members of Primrose Chapel, Mr. Lambert is good enough to ask me for my views on the resolution now before the meeting. I was about to give them to you. They are very simple and very decided. I oppose it uncompromisingly. The removal is impossible, on financial grounds. We are not a rich congregation, and we must not commit ourselves to the large expenditure involved. Mr. Powell generously offers a hundred pounds ; but the total required would run into thousands, and I am certain we could not get together the balance, however willing we might be to do so. You remember the story of the man who started to build a house, without counting the cost ? What happened to him would happen to us. We should have to leave our task unfinished. Mr. Powell's hundred pounds and the smaller sums which the rest of us, in spite of comparative poverty, subscribed, would all be wasted as surely as if put on the favourite in a crooked race."

He paused to note what effect he had made. Brown, who had listened in consternation, whispered to Powell :

" It's all up ! "

" Oh, no, it isn't," replied Powell ; and then, just as Mr. Cox was resuming his speech, he stood up, and said aloud :

" Pardon my interrupting you, sir, but I wish to make a remark or two on this question of expense before you pass on to anything else. As I said in seconding the resolution, I believe that money would

positively pour in once the change was decided upon. But for the moment I will accept your view that we should not obtain the total amount required. What then? Could we not borrow on mortgage of the new site and building? Of course we could! And the success of your ministry, Mr. Cox, would justify us in doing so. It has already brought many additional members to the chapel, and it will doubtless bring many more. And as the size, and consequently the resources, of the congregation increased, the mortgage debt would decrease. In two or three years we should owe nothing and be in full possession of the new building, with all its great advantages."

Mr. Cox was by this time quite calm and collected. His sporting instincts were still on occasion as keen as in his Bill Spottem days. The fight between him and Powell promised to be a good one, and he meant to win it.

"The fact, Mr. Powell," he said, "that you attribute the prosperity of the chapel to my ministry furnishes me with another argument against the removal. You may be right; my personal popularity may have caused the recent additions of members. But if this be so, there is need for caution. A prosperity that is due to the man, rather than to the institution, is not secure. Suppose I become less popular? It is quite possible that I may."

He was interrupted by loud cries of "No, no!" from the audience.

"Ah! but it is, my friends," he continued with a smile. "I shall endeavour to perform my duties as

well in the future as in the past, but I cannot be sure of succeeding. Besides, it does not altogether depend upon me. A minister may have a vogue, just as a jockey or a gold-mine may. Perhaps I am now enjoying one, and perhaps it is near its end. Yes, it is quite on the cards that the flowing tide will not be with us much longer. Instead of continuing to advance, our membership may recede. In six months' time it may be where it was six months ago. What a nice position we shall be in then, if we adopt this removal scheme! A huge building which we can't fill, and a huge debt which we can't meet! Consider this, my friends, and tell me if I am not right in opposing the resolution."

For a little time no one replied. Powell and Brown whispered together as to the best course to pursue, and so did Mr. Lambert and his wife. The rest of the audience sat silent and expectant. Powell and Mr. Lambert arrived at a decision in the same moment, but Mr. Lambert was the quicker to speak.

"My wife and I," he said, "do not take quite so pessimistic a view of the undertaking as you, Mr. Cox. Still, we are of opinion that it should not be entered upon lightly or hurriedly. Suppose Mr. Brown withdraws his resolution, and submits it again in a year's time, if circumstances seem to warrant it then?"

"The very thing I was about to suggest myself!" exclaimed Mr. Cox. "A year will show whether our present flourishing state is temporary or permanent. Also, it will improve our finances. Mr. Brown, I appeal to you to wait. Will you? I am sure it would be for the best."

"I don't know what to say—" began Brown.

"Pardon me," interrupted Powell, "I think a direct appeal like that a little unfair. Mr. Brown might yield to it out of personal regard for you, Mr. Cox, and yet might feel in his heart that he ought not to. No! the resolution has been proposed and seconded, and should be put to the vote. I believe the majority here are in favour of it, and rightly too. The membership is going to increase still further, and not to decrease. Let us pass the resolution, and then all subscribe as liberally as possible. What if we can't make up the whole amount required? As I have already pointed out, we can borrow the balance on mortgage of the new site and building."

Miss Minerva Grass had become greatly interested in the discussion. At last there was a section of the congregation opposed to Mr. Cox. Should she join it, in the hope of bringing about the restoration of Mr. Moon? She had considered this question while Powell was speaking, and had decided in the affirmative. Accordingly, as he finished, she jumped up, and said :

"Of course, we can borrow what we want on mortgage. And why should we hesitate to do so? There is no reason why. Listen to me, everybody. The present building is too small, and we must provide ourselves with a larger one. Yes, the removal is absolutely necessary. Mr. Cox's objections to it are foolish and cowardly, and prove him unworthy of the position he holds. Ah! what a mistake it was to send Mr. Moon away! He would not have endeavoured to stunt our natural growth.

He would have helped us on, not held us back, as Mr. Cox is doing. He would have—”

These remarks did not please the audience. Already there had been several murmurs of disapproval; and now Mr. Lambert definitely interposed with :

“Stop, Miss Grass! You’re out of order. The subject is not the comparative merits of Mr. Cox and Mr. Moon. That was debated at our last meeting.”

“And,” she replied defiantly, “it’s going to be debated at this one too.”

“But not on the resolution now before us,” said Mr. Cox. “Mr. Lambert is right, and, as chairman of the meeting, I declare you out of order.”

This ruling was received with general applause. Mr. Cox, who was very indignant at the turn Miss Grass had given the discussion, at once went on :

“Members of Primrose Chapel, as Mr. Brown does not seem inclined to withdraw his resolution, I submit it to vote. You have heard my views, and I think that as a body you agree with them. A removal at this stage of our career would be fatal to us. We might make a fight for a few rounds, but in the end we should be knocked clean out of time. The money is the difficulty. How can we hope to find the big amount required? Why, even now we are heavily in debt!”

“Excuse me,” put in Powell, “I wasn’t aware of that.”

“Then you ought to have been,” said Mr. Cox, who had reserved this point as his last and strongest argument. “I wonder at your presuming to recom-

mend the proposal, without first ascertaining our financial position. Raise money on mortgage indeed! Let us be off with the old love before we are on with the new. This very building in which we are gathered together is mortgaged for two thousand pounds. We have been told to-night that the sale of it would give us a nice little sum to start with. It would not. The mortgage would take the lot. Members of Primrose Chapel, the resolution must not be passed. I charge you most solemnly to vote against it. As I have just informed you, we owe two thousand pounds already. To heap fresh debts on the top of that would be foolish, reckless, and wicked, in the extreme."

During the latter part of this, Powell and Brown had been whispering together.

"Is there really a mortgage on the chapel?" asked Powell, on Mr. Cox making his statement to that effect.

"Yes," replied Brown.

"Hang you! Why didn't you say so before? If I had known it, I'd never have gone in for this removal business."

"I didn't think it mattered. But look here, Powell, hadn't I better withdraw the resolution? It can't possibly pass."

"Of course it can't, with that mortgage in the way. Do what you like."

The next moment Mr. Cox finished his speech. Loud and enthusiastic applause showed that the greater part of the audience sided with him. He smiled, and said:

"That response to my words cheers me. I await

the vote with confidence. Those in favour of the resolution, please hold up—”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Brown, “I wish to withdraw it, if you haven’t any objection. I am now convinced that the time is not yet ripe for removal.”

Again there was applause. At the end of it, Mr. Cox said :

“I’ve no objection. It’s a pity, though, that you didn’t withdraw it when I asked you to a little while ago. You’d have saved me and the meeting generally a good deal of trouble.”

“I am very sorry,” said Brown nervously. “I apologise both to you and the meeting.”

“I don’t think you need do that,” exclaimed Powell. “I’m sure you’ve acted quite honestly in the matter.”

Mr. Cox smiled. An idea had occurred to him. So far he had considered this attempt of Brown and Powell to obtain possession of the chapel, and subsequently of the jewels, from a serious point of view only. Now, however, he would try to get some amusement from it.

“Of course, you needn’t apologise, Mr. Brown,” he said. “I didn’t intend my remarks to be taken in that sense. Please understand that everybody here fully appreciates the splendid services you have rendered since you were appointed a deacon.”

There was a chorus of “Hear, hears.”

“Yes,” he continued, “you and Mr. Powell have, indeed, done well. Members of Primrose Chapel, one resolution has just been withdrawn from you. I venture to propose another. It is a formal vote of thanks to Messrs. Brown and Powell for their work

in connection with the chapel. In their respective capacities of deacon and organist they have laboured manfully. Much of our present prosperity is due to their efforts during the last three months. The least we can do is to express to them our gratitude. Will someone kindly second the resolution?"

Miss Summers and Mrs. Kronk at once jumped up to do so, the former impelled by her friendship for Powell, and the latter by hers for Brown. They looked at each other questioningly.

"Perhaps," remarked Mr. Cox, perceiving the difficulty, "you, Mrs. Kronk, would be good enough to second it, and you, Miss Summers, to say something in support of it?"

They did this. Afterwards he put the resolution to the meeting. It was passed unanimously.

"I have much pleasure," he then said, "in asking you, Messrs. Brown and Powell, to accept this vote of thanks. Your efforts to increase the membership, and otherwise promote the well-being of the chapel, entitle you to it. I trust it will encourage you to even greater efforts in the future. If it does, that removal scheme may eventually become practicable, in which case we shall all be delighted to hear from you again on the subject."

During the applause which followed this, Powell whispered to Brown :

"You'll have to reply. I'll be shot if I will."

Brown nodded, and then rose, and murmured a few words in acknowledgment of the vote. After more applause, Mr. Cox, satisfied with his little joke, picked up the agenda paper, and introduced the next item of business. Powell, however, took no interest in it.

His mind was occupied with other matters. How was he to be revenged on Mr. Cox for having spoiled his plan for getting the jewels? What new plan was he to form? By the end of the meeting he had succeeded in finding an answer to both these questions.

"Good-bye," he said to Brown, directly the people began to leave. "I'm off!"

"Aren't you going back to the organ to play us out?" asked Brown, in surprise. "Mr. Cox will think it strange if you don't."

"Hang Mr. Cox, and hang his votes of thanks! I'm off, I tell you!"

He hurried down the aisle, and was almost the first to leave the chapel. Standing by the gate, he watched those who came out after him. Several seemed inclined to enter into conversation with him, but he did not respond to their advances. He was awaiting Miss Minerva Grass. It was through her that he hoped to get the jewels and be revenged on Mr. Cox.

CHAPTER XIV

PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN PUBLIC-HOUSES

AT last Miss Minerva Grass appeared. Powell allowed her to pass him, and then turned and followed her. When they were both out of sight of the chapel, he stepped up to her side and wished her good evening.

"Oh, how do you do, Mr. Powell?" she said. "I wasn't aware that you lived in this direction."

"I don't," he replied. "I took it because you did. I wanted to say how grateful I am to you for supporting the removal scheme."

"That's all right. I'm sorry it didn't go through. You owe that to Mr. Cox."

"I know I do; and I hate him for it."

"Hate him?"

"Yes, hate him."

"What, in spite of that vote of thanks he gave you?"

"A thousand votes of thanks wouldn't alter my feelings. That larger building is a pet idea of mine, and I won't have my pet ideas spoiled."

"I understand," she said musingly.

"I wish," he went on, "I could find a way to get level with him. But I suppose it's impossible."

"I suppose so; and yet—"

"Yes?" he questioned.

"And yet I may be able to show you a way," she replied, with sudden determination. "Did you ever meet Mr. Moon, who was the minister of Primrose Chapel before Mr. Cox."

"No; but I've heard of him. Some people seem to think he was shabbily treated by the congregation."

"He was. They practically turned him out. Mr. Brown and Mr. Lambert had something to do with it; but the actual ringleader was Mr. Cox. He came to the chapel as *locum tenens* to Mr. Moon, and used the opportunities that gave him to worm himself into the permanent position."

"Very mean conduct."

"Atrociously mean; and I hate him for it. Yes, Mr. Powell, we both hate him, and both wish to get level with him."

"And how can we? What is the way you spoke of showing me?"

"This. We'll work against him, just as he worked against Mr. Moon. He also shall be turned out of the chapel. Already you, and I, and Mr. Brown, who, I assume, feels as you do in the matter, and several others, are opposed to him. I'm sure that, in time, we few could win over the majority of the congregation. Mr. Moon is cleverer, nicer-looking, and more cultured than Mr. Cox. When they realise this—and we'll make them do so—they can't help preferring him."

"You propose, then, that Mr. Moon should succeed Mr. Cox?"

"I do. And that, afterwards, he and I should back

up you and Mr. Brown in the removal scheme. To put it plainly, we'll assist you with your pet idea, if you'll assist us with ours. Yours is the larger building, and ours the re-appointment of Mr. Moon as minister. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes, it's a bargain," replied Powell. "I'll answer for myself and Mr. Brown, and you—"

"For myself and Mr. Moon," added Miss Grass. "I know he'll be willing."

She smiled triumphantly. So did Powell, and with more reason. The arrangement they had just made had occurred to him as possible before he left the chapel, and he had followed her with the intention of proposing it if she seemed inclined to receive it favourably. He had managed things very well. To have induced her to think of it, and put it into words herself, was indeed a conversational triumph.

"And now," he said, "we must settle on a definite plan of campaign. Suppose we first of all—hullo! it's beginning to rain."

"So it is," she replied. "I'd better wish you good-bye, and hurry home."

"Oh, no! Let's stand up for a few minutes. It's only a shower."

He looked about for some place of shelter. They were now in the High Street, and immediately opposite to them was "The Three Crowns." This was the public-house where Brown drank brandy as a restorative on the night he discovered that the jewels had been built on, and where Mr. Cox once obtained a penny postage-stamp, and at the same time endangered his reputation for sobriety. Powell was destined to give it yet another claim to fame. As

soon as he noticed it, he took Miss Grass's arm, and started to walk across the road.

"Come on!" he said. "I don't like to propose it, but the circumstances are exceptional; and if you don't mind, we'll run in here until—"

By this time they had reached "The Three Crowns," and he was opening the door of the saloon bar.

"I'm not going inside a public-house!" she cried, stepping away from him indignantly. "I've never done such a thing in my life."

"My dear Miss Grass," he expostulated, "even if you haven't, please do so now. The circumstances are really very exceptional. We want to get out of the rain, and we want a confidential business talk, and—"

"It's altogether against my principles," she broke in. "Surely we can have the talk some other evening?"

"We oughtn't to postpone it," he pleaded, taking her arm again, and gently leading her back to the door. "Remember that the matter's urgent, and also that it concerns Mr. Moon. Please, please, Miss Grass! For his sake, not for mine!"

"Very well," she snapped, allowing him to usher her in. Then, in softer tones, she added: "As you say, for his sake."

Powell conducted her to a quiet corner of the bar, and then fetched drinks for both of them, her choice being lemonade, and his something a little stronger. Afterwards they discussed the contemplated restoration of Mr. Moon. Before long Powell realised that it would be a very difficult task, and half regretted

that he had committed himself to it. However, he decided not to withdraw. There was a chance of success, and, in any case, there would be the satisfaction of annoying Mr. Cox, and so getting level with him for his recent action.

At the end of about a quarter of an hour they ascertained that the rain had ceased, and rose to go. Several important points had been settled during the discussion. Miss Grass was to write to Mr. Moon, who was again in Paris, summoning him to come at once and join in the campaign. Powell was to make sure of Brown and to sound some more of the deacons. Another point related to themselves only. In the event of complete success—that is to say, of Mr. Moon being restored and the removal scheme adopted—Powell was to resign the post of organist, which he still filled, in favour of Miss Grass. This he himself had suggested, and she had gratefully accepted.

Miss Grass led the way out. A shock was in store for her. As she stepped into the street, she found herself side by side with Miss Summers, who chanced to be passing at that moment. She gave an involuntary cry. Miss Summers turned, and seeing her, stopped, and exclaimed :

“What, you, Miss Grass !”

Then seeing Powell also, she continued, with a forced laugh :

“And you, too, Dick Powell ! Really, I must congratulate ‘The Three Crowns’ on the quality of its patrons.”

“Miss Summers,” said Miss Grass agitatedly, “I hope you don’t think I’m in the habit of frequenting this house—because I’m not.”

"Of course, not," put in Powell, sympathising with her. "It was simply to oblige me that you went in to-night."

"Oh, indeed!" observed Miss Summers. "Simply to oblige you!"

"What Mr. Powell means," said Miss Grass, still more agitatedly, "is that he persuaded me against my wish. There were special circumstances. It was raining, and we wanted to talk over some important business, and—"

"Please don't trouble to explain," broke in Miss Summers, with another forced laugh. "After all, it's nothing to do with me how you two amuse yourselves. If you like visiting such places, you're quite at liberty to. Good-night!"

"Look here!" exclaimed Powell, "you really must not think that we—"

"Good-night!" she repeated. "I'm in a hurry. Do you remember, Miss Grass, the dreadful things you once said about Mr. Cox for calling at 'The Three Crowns'? People who live in public-houses shouldn't throw stones, you know."

With this last shot, she turned and hurried away. Miss Grass looked after her despairingly.

"I wouldn't have had this happen for anything," she murmured to Powell reproachfully.

"I'm very sorry," he replied.

"Everybody will hear of it sooner or later."

"Oh, no!"

"But I say—oh, yes. She's just the sort of person to make a scandal."

"Nonsense!" said Powell impatiently. "She's a very nice little woman, when you know her. Besides,

even if people do hear of it, there'll be no great harm done."

"Won't there, though," she retorted indignantly. "Take the case of Mr. Moon. What opinion do you think he'll have of me then? But it's no use discussing the matter. Good-night, Mr. Powell!"

"We won't part yet. I'll see you a bit farther on your way home."

"I'd rather you didn't. I feel so upset that I want to be by myself. We'll meet at the chapel next Sunday morning, and have another talk about our campaign against Mr. Cox. If we succeed in that, I may be able to forget the present unfortunate incident. Good-night!"

She spoke decidedly, and Powell shook hands with her, and let her go on alone, as she wished. He watched her until she passed out of sight, and then turned and walked quickly in the opposite direction. A new idea in connection with the jewels had occurred to him, and he had resolved to test its value that very night. To do so he would have to see Miss Summers, and he was accordingly now making for her house.

The idea was this. He and Miss Summers would marry each other; afterwards he would tell her where the jewels were, and she, on proving her identity with Miss Fluffy Fluff, the rightful owner, would be able to recover them through the police or the chapel authorities without difficulty; he and she, being husband and wife, would then go shares dutifully and lovingly. What had suggested it to him was her evident annoyance at finding him and Miss Grass on familiar terms. That looked like jealousy; and jealousy implies love. Had her feelings towards

him undergone a change? It seemed probable that they had, and that although years ago she had refused to marry him, at the present time she would be glad to do so. In that case, she should; for he was still willing, and, indeed, intended to propose to her at their forthcoming interview.

She had gone straight home after the talk outside "The Three Crowns," but as she had walked slowly, she had only just entered the house and was standing in the passage when he knocked. She at once opened the door.

"Ah, you are back, then?" he said.

"Yes, I'm back," she replied, with a frown; "but not because I expected you. This is a nice time of night to call on anybody! However, come in. There are several things I want to tell you."

"And there are several things I want to tell you, Fluffy."

"Yours can wait; mine won't," she said, leading the way in. "Sit down somewhere. Now first, Dick Powell, you'd better know that I'm particularly angry with you."

"But really you quite misunderstand about Miss Grass and me. We're the barest acquaintances, and—"

"Don't talk nonsense!" she broke in heatedly. "That's not what makes me angry."

"Well, then, what is it?"

"My jewels. Months ago you promised that you'd recover half of them for me, and you've promised the same thing a dozen times since. But I haven't seen a single one of them, and I don't suppose I ever shall. You're fooling me."

"No, no!" he protested. "I swear I've been hoping and trying to get them."

"Again and again," she continued bitterly, "you've assured me that you are on the track of your old partner, Bill Spottem, and that directly you run him down it will be all right. I'm tired of that tale. Give me the truth. Didn't you find him when you came out of prison? Didn't he hand over your share? Aren't you living on the proceeds of it now?"

"I declare most solemnly that I haven't seen either him or the jewels since the night of the burglary."

"Well, I don't believe you; and that's straight."

Not knowing that Spottem and Mr. Cox were one and the same person, Powell thought he had spoken the truth, and therefore resented her contradiction.

"Yes, that's straight enough," he answered, in tones as bitter as her own; "and insulting enough, too."

For some moments there was silence. Then, feeling that perhaps she had gone too far, she said apologetically:

"I don't want to insult you."

"Well, why do so? I repeat that I haven't seen either since the night of the burglary. I'll swear it, if you like."

"And will you also swear that you're on Spottem's track?"

Powell flushed. Not being able to give her the real explanation of his hopes of getting the jewels, he had often put forward this one, and had always

considered it a very creditable invention. Still, he hesitated to swear to it.

"Quick!" she exclaimed. "Will you?"

"I think it," he began, in obvious embarrassment, "a little unfair of you to insist that—"

"Ah, you won't!" she cried. "As I said just now, you're fooling me."

"No, no! Really, I'm not. Why should I want to?"

"How can I tell? It's all a mystery to me. What did you come to Primrose Chapel for? Why have you been taking such an interest in its progress? Why are you and Mr. Brown so thick with each other? Why did you press that ridiculous removal scheme? Why did Miss Grass support it? Ah! I expect that, if the truth were known, that woman would turn out to be at the bottom of everything."

"Miss Grass?"

"Yes, Miss Grass. Hateful, designing creature! What on earth you see in her I can't make out. Still, there's no accounting for tastes."

Powell smiled. He had hoped all along that her outbreak was due to jealousy aroused by his apparent intimacy with Miss Grass. Now he felt certain of it, and also of speedily putting matters right.

"If you'll listen a minute," he said, "I'll explain just what my relations with that young lady are."

"I don't wish to know," she replied, misunderstanding, and consequently resenting, his smile. "We'll drop the subject."

"Still—"

"We'll drop the subject. I've got something else to tell you. I'm going away to-morrow."

"What! For good?"

"No, only for a week. But it's quite possible I may be going for good before long. Aren't you sorry?"

"Of course I am. But what's the idea?"

"That I'm returning to my old work," she replied triumphantly. "Off with Daisy Summers, the Primrose Chapel attendant, and on with Fluffy Fluff, the music-hall artist! Do you think my voice will do? Listen."

She sang a few notes, and then said: "Is it all right?"

"Never been better? But what arrangements have you made? Where are you opening?"

"Oh! I've got a week's engagement at a provincial hall with some of my old songs, beginning to-morrow evening. I mean it as a sort of test. It'll prove whether I'm as good as I used to be. If I am, then hurrah for the London halls again!"

Powell shook his head, and said: "I'm afraid you're making a mistake."

"In what way?"

"In every way. You ought to open in London. Besides, you ought to have new songs. The old ones were all very well in their day, but that day's gone. Look here, Fluffy, take my advice, and wait a bit. I'll write you a couple of up-to-date songs, and then we'll fix up a show at the Tivoli or the Oxford, and boom it big beforehand. That'll give you a fair chance."

"I daresay it would," she observed contemptuously. "Still, I shan't wait for it."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm sick of waiting. It's months since I discovered my voice had come back, and all the time I've wanted to try my luck on the halls again. You, however, have kept me from doing so. Can you deny it? Can you even explain it?"

Powell was at a loss how to answer. It was a fact that he had consistently urged her to postpone her re-appearance as a public singer. His reason had been that he had wished her to be with him at the chapel until the question of the jewels was settled; but he could not tell her this.

"Oh, well," she went on quickly, "it doesn't matter. My mind's made up. I begin to-morrow evening in the provinces."

"What town?" he inquired, thankful for the turn in the conversation.

"That I shan't say. I meant to do so; indeed, I meant to ask you to come down with me. But after what I saw an hour ago, I certainly won't. You can stay at home with 'The Three Crowns' and your dear Miss Grass."

"Hang Miss Grass! I repeat that she and I are the barest acquaintances."

"And I repeat that I don't care what you are."

"But—" he began.

"But nothing," she broke in. "I've said all I want to, Dick Powell, and now you'd better go."

She rose, opened the door of the room, and held it for him to pass out. He remained seated, and replied:

"Not just yet. You may have said all you want to, but I haven't. Sit down."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," she exclaimed, indignant at his peremptory tone. "Please go at once."

The situation amused him. She was treating him very rudely; yet he was on the point of proposing marriage to her, and felt certain of receiving a favourable answer. He laughed aloud.

"Leave my house!" she said, more indignant than ever. "I won't have you here any longer."

He laughed again, and then said :

"You quite misunderstand my intentions. There's absolutely nothing between me and Miss Grass. My reason for calling on you to-night was simply—"

"To continue making a fool of me, I suppose," she put in. "To tell a few more lies about my jewels and that man Spottem. I don't want to hear them. I've got something else to do. Are you going?"

He shook his head.

"Well, if you're not, I am," she exclaimed, leaving the room. "When you're tired of being there alone, perhaps you'll let yourself out."

For some moments he remained seated, listening to her footsteps. Then he jumped up and muttered :

"Good heavens! this is a nice way to be treated by a woman you're about to propose to. What's to be done? Follow her, and get it over? Yes, that's the best course. Here goes after her!"

He went downstairs, which was the direction he had heard her take, and presently found her. She was standing just inside a cellar, opening from the bottom of the stairway. He entered, and looked around him in surprise. The cellar, which was lit by a single gas jet, was irregularly shaped and of unexpectedly large extent.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, "this is quite a Guy Fawkes sort of place. Runs right under the chapel apparently. A barrel of gunpowder and a slow match any Sunday morning, and up would fly the Rev. Mr. Cox and his flock."

She smiled amiably, partly because the suggestion amused her, and partly because she had begun to regret her exceeding rudeness to him.

"Yes," she said, "it runs right under the chapel. Mr. Goodman meant it to be a storehouse for hassocks, Sunday school chairs and forms, and so on. But it's not much used."

Suddenly he clapped a hand to his forehead and started back. Another new idea in connection with the jewels had occurred to him.

"What's the matter?" she inquired.

"Nothing, nothing! Just remembered that I've got some important letters to write to-night. That's all."

"Then you'd better hurry away and write them. It's eleven o'clock already."

"I will," he replied, dismissing the idea for the moment. "But first let me say what I've been so long trying to. It's this. I love you, and want to marry you. Years ago you refused me, but now you will accept me—won't you, Fluffy dear? Of course you will. You love me just as much as I love you, and together we'll—"

"That's enough," she interrupted. "Love you? Marry you? No, thanks!"

"Don't say that!"

"But I do. I wonder you dare ask me, after what has happened. Perhaps you intend it as a joke?"

"I was never more serious in my life. Look here, I promise you on my honour that directly we're married we'll be able to get those jewels."

"What has our being married to do with them?"

"Much more than you suppose. I can't explain why now, but I will some day. Please accept me, Fluffy!"

"I wouldn't, if you were the only man in the world!" she exclaimed, her anger and doubt returning.
"I hate you!"

"Oh, no, you don't," he protested. "You're still thinking of Miss Grass. I assure you there's absolutely no need for you to be jealous of her."

"Jealous of her! Jealous of her!" she cried, stamping her foot. "This is past bearing!"

"But—"

"Not another word! If you want to marry me, it's only because I'm going back to the music halls, and may soon be earning a big salary. Leave my house, Dick Powell, and never enter it again!"

"But—" he repeated.

"If you don't go at once, I'll call in a policeman. Yes, and I'll tell Mr. Cox, and Mr. Brown, and the rest of your respectable friends, what you used to be. They little think that they're associating with an ex-burglar."

For a moment or two Powell stood irresolute; then he shrugged his shoulders, cast a last glance round the cellar, and turned away. A minute later he was in the road outside.

"That idea's exploded," he muttered. "It's a fortunate thing I hit on a new one."

As he walked towards his lodgings, he considered

this new idea. Briefly, it was that he and Brown should occupy Miss Summers' house during her week's absence, and should tunnel from the cellar to the jewels. One corner of it was, he estimated, not more than a dozen yards from them. If this were so, the tunnel could easily be constructed within the week. But was the estimate correct? And would Brown join in the attempt? And would it be possible to obtain absolute possession of the house?

CHAPTER XV

A WHITE-WASHING AND RE-PAPERING ADVENTURE

EARLY the next morning Powell called on Brown at his place of business, and laid the tunnelling scheme before him. At first he refused to have anything to do with it, but in the end he yielded to Powell's alternate threats and persuasions.

"Very well, we'll try," he said. "It's dreadfully risky, though. People are almost sure to wonder what we're up to, and ask awkward questions."

"That'll be all right," replied Powell. "I've thought of a plausible pretext for our occupation of the house. You're a builder and decorator, and you're also a deacon of Primrose Chapel, and a friend of Miss Summers. What more natural than that you should whitewash and repaper her rooms while she's away? They want it badly enough."

"H'm! certainly plausible," said Brown, his face brightening. "Would do me good with the congregation, too, if they heard I was doing it without charge because of my interest in her and the chapel."

"Of course it would! They'd consider it a piece of remarkable generosity; they might even give you a vote of thanks for it at the next general meeting. But seriously, I believe it's an absolutely safe plan."

"Perhaps so. At any rate, we'll adopt it. When does Miss Summers go away?"

"I don't know exactly, but probably within an hour or two. Why do you ask?"

"Because I ought to see her first, and tell her what I propose to do, oughtn't I?"

After a brief consideration, Powell replied:

"No; better not. She might be independent, and say she'd get her whitewashing and paper-hanging done without troubling you. Wait until she's gone, and then tell Mr. Cox. She's evidently arranged with him about her holiday, and he'll have the keys of the house, and be able to hand them over to you."

"All right! Only remember there's no time to spare, if we're to dig the tunnel inside the week."

"I quite realise that. Look here, I'll leave you now, and come back when I find she's started. Meanwhile, you can be putting together the tools and other things we are likely to want."

Brown nodded, and Powell hurried off. An hour later he returned with the news that he had met Miss Summers on her way to the railway-station.

"Then I suppose I'd better go round to Mr. Cox at once?" said Brown.

"Yes," replied Powell, who was looking out of the window of the office in which they were standing. "But—hullo! this is extraordinary luck. He's just walking into your yard."

"Who? Cox?"

"Yes. He'll be with us directly. Don't be in a hurry about our little affair. Mention it to him incidentally, as a sort of impromptu. It'll sound better than—"

There was a knock at the door.

"Hush! Here he is," whispered Brown; and then added aloud: "Come in!"

Mr. Cox stepped into the office, a wearied expression on his face. He had lain awake during the greater part of the night, considering what he should do with regard to the jewels, now that he knew they were under the chapel. The right course was to inform Powell and Brown of his identity with Bill Spottem, and to demand that they should join him in recovering the stolen property and restoring it to Fluffy Fluff. He could not, however, quite make up his mind to this, principally because he was afraid that they might vindictively pass on the information to some policeman, who would then arrest him as an unpunished burglar. Another course was to say nothing to them, but to watch them even more closely than he had done during the last three months, and to defeat all their attempts to get the jewels, and perhaps some day contrive to get them himself and give them privately to Fluffy Fluff. This appealed to his sporting instincts, which were still very strong. Yet another course was to sacrifice his principles, and renew the former criminal partnership, he taking his third of the property, and Powell and Brown each theirs. This was an old temptation of his, but it had never assailed him so fiercely as at the present time.

"Good morning!" said Brown and Powell simultaneously, as he entered.

"Good morning!" he replied. "How do you do? An unexpected pleasure to find you here, Mr. Powell."

In spite of his long deliberation, he was still in doubt as to the course to choose. Indeed, his reason

for this visit was the hope that something would occur during it to lead him to a definite decision. Although surprised to meet Powell as well as Brown, he was not disappointed, for he felt that a talk with both of them might be more helpful than one with Brown alone. But he also felt that it would have to be delicately managed, and accordingly opened it with a remark which had, he thought, no possible bearing on the subject of the jewels.

"One of the things I've called about, Mr. Brown, is," he said, "to tell you that Miss Summers has gone away for a holiday. She asked me for permission the other day, and I gave it her. Maybe I should have consulted you and the rest of the deacons first; but I was pretty sure you'd all be willing."

"Certainly, certainly!" exclaimed Brown. "It's a long while since she had a holiday. So far from objecting to it, I should like to show my good feeling towards her by whitewashing and—"

He broke off abruptly, remembering Powell's injunction not to be in a hurry to mention the matter.

"By what?" questioned Mr. Cox.

Brown glanced at Powell anxiously. He glanced back impatiently, and whispered :

"Go on, now that you've begun."

Mr. Cox saw the glances and heard the whisper, and listened to Brown with a new interest as he resumed :

"Yes, I should like to show my good feeling towards her by whitewashing and repapering her house. I've several times meant to do it, and this seems a splendid opportunity. If you approve, I'll

start a couple of my men on the job to-day. It won't be a big one, and I shan't charge either the chapel or Miss Summers a single penny."

"It's kind of you," said Mr. Cox thoughtfully. "I didn't know the house wanted doing up. But I suppose it does?"

"Oh, yes," replied Brown.

"No doubt about that," added Powell. "I noticed, when visiting her recently, that several of the rooms are in a very bad state. She would be delighted to find them all right when she returned."

Mr. Cox felt sure there was something, although he could not imagine what, behind the proposal, and accordingly wished to prevent its being carried out; but it was, on the surface, so simple and desirable, that he was at a loss how to oppose it.

"It's kind of you," he repeated. "But—but—" He paused for a moment, and then, getting an idea, continued: "But on the whole, Mr. Brown, I think it would be better to wait until Miss Summers is back. She ought, for instance, to be consulted as to the patterns of the wall papers; otherwise you might put up one which would be a constant eyesore to her. Yes, I think it would be better to wait. Don't you?"

Brown frowned in perplexity. Powell, however, came quickly to the rescue.

"This is too bad!" he exclaimed, with a laugh. "Mr. Brown volunteers to be generous, and you, Mr. Cox, throw cold water over him, so to speak. Surely he can be trusted to choose suitable patterns! Why, it's his business. I'd back him at it against a dozen like Miss Summers."

"You misunderstand," said Mr. Cox. "The point is that different people have different tastes in wall papers, and that—"

"The real point," interrupted Powell, "is, I expect, that Mr. Brown is not very busy just at present, and could spare a man or two for the job; whereas in another week he may be full up with remunerative work."

"That's it," said Brown, accepting the lead. "I can do it easily now, but not so easily a little later. I think you must let me have my own way, Mr. Cox. Consider, it'll be more convenient, not only for me, but also for Miss Summers. She'll escape the bother and discomfort of having pots of paint, and so on, in the house while she's living in it. Everything will be done during her holiday."

Realising that continued opposition would excite suspicion, Mr. Cox yielded.

"Your reasons are stronger than mine, and I'll throw up the sponge before I'm knocked out," he said, with a smile. "Miss Summers gave me the key of her house, with those of the chapel, when she went. I think I've got it in my pocket. Yes, here it is. You can send your workmen round this very morning, if you like."

"Thanks," replied Brown, taking the key. "I'll do so."

"And now that that's settled," said Mr. Cox, with a well-simulated air of indifference, "there's something else I want to speak about."

For a few minutes longer the three sat talking. Then Mr. Cox left. During the talk he had touched on various subjects, including the discussion of the

removal scheme at the recent general meeting, but had said nothing to indicate, even vaguely, that he was Bill Spottem, or that he knew the jewels were under the chapel. The course he had finally decided to adopt with regard to them was the one which appealed to his sporting instincts. He would be silent and watchful, and with luck and courage would, he hoped, eventually defeat Powell and Brown at their own game.

"We succeeded in getting over him," remarked Brown, when he had gone; "but I was beginning to doubt whether we should."

"So was I," said Powell. "Curious that he opposed us in this and also in the larger building business. Almost suggests that he has some idea of what we are up to."

"Heavens!" cried Brown. "Do you think he has?"

"Well, no, I don't. In fact, it's impossible that he should. Only you and I knew where the jewels were buried, and neither of us has told anybody. No, it's merely a coincidence."

"I suppose that's all."

"Yes, that's all," said Powell decidedly. "And now let's be moving. There's a lot to do before we can actually start digging the tunnel."

They proceeded to make the necessary arrangements. First they visited Miss Summers' house, and carefully measured the walls of the cellar, its depth below the ground level, and its distance from the stump of the curiously-shaped tree. Then they returned, and after sending some of Brown's workmen round with instructions to go ahead as quickly as

possible with the whitewashing and papering, shut themselves in the office to consider the measurements they had taken.

"I think we had better prepare a rough plan," said Powell.

"Yes, might be as well," replied Brown, spreading a sheet of drawing paper on the desk. "I'll do it, while you check me. Let me see, the chapel runs due east and west. Then this shall be its near side and this its front."

It was a more difficult task than they had expected; but at last it was completed. They examined it with an air of satisfaction. Everything was down: the chapel, the jewels, the stump of the curiously-shaped tree, and the cellar. The relative positions were marked as accurately as possible, the twenty paces due north from the curiously-shaped tree being reduced to feet, and the distance of the jewels below the ground-level being closely estimated.

"We start the tunnel at this corner of the cellar," said Brown, tapping the plan with his finger, "and work in this direction, with a slight upward slope."

"Yes, that's the line," assented Powell. "Under the chapel the whole way. What's the length?"

"Forty foot, and just a week to dig it in—no, less than a week. We can't begin until the whitewashing and papering's done, and that'll take quite a couple of days."

"Oh, we won't wait for that!" said Powell, with a laugh. "I never intended to. As soon as your workmen have made the house in a bit of a mess, out they come, and in we go."

At first Brown demurred as to this. Powell, however, soon convinced him that it would be the wisest course. The whitewashing and papering was, he pointed out, the excuse for the occupation of the house. Therefore it must not be finished before the tunnel was. Its slow progress could, if inquiry were made by Mr. Cox or anybody else, be attributed to the temporary employment of Brown's men on a more pressing job.

Late that day, under cover of the darkness, they managed, without being observed, to introduce into the cellar spades and other tools, and also a number of lengths of wood to be used in shoring up the tunnel. The next morning Brown, as arranged, found a more pressing job for his men, and sent them off to it; then, accompanied by Powell, he walked to Miss Summers' house, entered it, and descended to the cellar again.

"At last!" exclaimed Powell, taking off his coat and turning up his shirt sleeves. "Yes, at last we are doing something, instead of merely planning and talking. Ha, ha! Once on board the tunnel, and the jewels are ours."

"You seem pretty happy," said Brown.

"I am. This is the sort of thing I like. Melodrama in real life; the scent of the footlights over the hayfields. Let me see! this is the corner. Come on. First of all, we've got to get these bricks out."

They worked steadily for nearly an hour, at the end of which time they had made a gap, five feet high and three or four broad, in the wall. As they removed the last brick to the far side of the cellar, Powell said:

"Now we'll rest for a bit."

"Tired?" inquired Brown.

"A little. Still happy, though. Feel I'm in the same crowd with Monte Cristo, Fortunato, and the other fictional people who had to do with tunnels. Got a cigarette with you?"

"Sorry I haven't."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. Yes, delightfully fictional. By Jove! it wouldn't make a bad novel—the whole affair, I mean—beginning with the burglary, and continuing with what's happened to the jewels and us since. I think I shall write it."

"Don't," said Brown, shaking his head. "It would be a failure."

"Why would it?" exclaimed Powell indignantly. "There's plenty of incident. The burglary itself; the burial of the jewels; our being caught, and Spottem escaping; my getting a longer sentence than you; the chapel being built over the jewels, and our becoming deacon and organist at it; the removal scheme and this present business. What more do you want?"

"It would be a failure," repeated Brown. "I'm a regular novel reader, and I know what goes down with the public and what doesn't. This wouldn't. In the first place, there's no love interest, and that's absolutely essential."

"Oh, I could give it a love interest without any difficulty," said Powell, thinking of his relations with Miss Summers and Miss Grass.

"And in the second place," went on Brown, with the air of a successful publisher lecturing an unsuccessful author, "the chapel parts are against it."

"How do you mean?"

"Chapels must be treated seriously in novels, or not at all. To write about digging through the floor of one, or tunnelling under it, would shock people. They'd say you were irreverent, and—"

"Irreverent? Absurd! They'd see that those parts were quite subsidiary to us and the jewels."

"No, they wouldn't. They'd take exactly the opposite view."

"What, that we and the jewels were subsidiary?"

"Yes, and that the real object of the whole thing was to poke fun at chapels and chapel life."

"Well, they'd be asses if they did," declared Powell, with a laugh. "Still, assuming that you're right, there's a way out of the difficulty. I might substitute some other building for the chapel in the novel. Make you come out of quod, and find the burial-place covered by a public-house, or, better, a government office."

"Don't talk nonsense!" said Brown impatiently. "A government office would be almost as irreverent as a chapel."

"How would the lions' house at a zoological gardens do? Might be treated very dramatically. Or a police station? Ah! that's a big idea. Yes, the burial-place shall be covered by a police station. You shall become a policeman, and I a detective. We'll both be appointed to this particular station, and on some quiet night we'll drug the sergeant, lock up the inspector, and—"

"Oh, drop it!" exclaimed Brown. "The present position's bad enough; you needn't trouble to invent worse ones. Are you ready to start work again?"

"Quite," replied Powell, rising from the box on which he had been sitting. "We'll finish this discussion some other time. I think the last idea for the building is the best. Don't you? Or are you afraid that people might say the real object of the whole thing was to poke fun at policemen and police stations?"

Brown made no reply. Powell laughed, and contemplating the gap in the cellar wall, said:

"Well, we've cleared those bricks out. Now we dig straight ahead through the earth, I suppose. But first, have you got a cigarette?"

"You asked me before, and I told you I hadn't," growled Brown.

"So I did. I forgot. Look here, I'll go and get some. This tunnelling business has excited me tremendously, and I simply must have a smoke. It'll soothe me."

"I hope it will. Perhaps you'll talk a little more sensibly then."

"Undoubtedly I shall," replied Powell. "Nothing more about novels, government offices, and police stations. Ha, ha! Good-bye! Back in five minutes!"

In spite of this promise, he did not return until nearly half an hour had passed. As he entered, Brown, who had been working hard during his absence, said reproachfully:

"A long five minutes!"

"Sorry," replied Powell. "Met Miss Grass. Only just got away. And now, if you don't mind, I want you to accompany me to her house."

"Whatever for?"

"Oh, rather an unfortunate matter," replied Powell. "I'll explain. I'd better begin with what happened after I left you on the night of the general meeting."

In a few words he described the arrangement he and Miss Grass had made, with a view to the restoration to Primrose Chapel of the Rev. Marmaduke Moon, and the adoption of the removal scheme.

"Absolutely impossible!" commented Brown. "The congregation wouldn't stand Moon again at any price."

"I agree with you," said Powell. "I thought at the time there was a chance; but I've realised since that there isn't. Besides, as we're certain of obtaining the jewels directly we've finished this tunnel, we needn't interest ourselves any further in the removal scheme."

"No. Drop the whole affair."

"I mean to. Miss Grass, however, is eager to go on. Moon's in Paris, and she informs me she's sent him an urgent summons, and expects him to-morrow or the next day."

"A bit awkward. But why do you suggest that we should call on her now?"

"Oh, I told her we would. You see, she believes that you also are in the plot, and I thought we'd walk round together, and persuade her it's no good."

"H'm! seems to me you might have done that by yourself."

"I tried, but failed. She's simply a terror at an argument. The two of us would be sure to succeed, though."

"But what does it matter?" protested Brown.

"Let's leave her and Mr. Moon alone, and get on with the tunnel."

"That's just the point," replied Powell. "We can't get on with it peaceably until we've settled with them. They'll be worrying us all the week ; perhaps even hunting us up here. Much better end things at once."

Brown then reluctantly agreed to go, and they put on their hats and left the house. Two or three minutes later Mr. Cox walked up to it, and knocked at the door. Since parting with the key on the previous day he had puzzled a good deal as to the real reason for which it was required, the manner of Powell and Brown having convinced him that the one advanced was only a pretext. So far he had not arrived at any conclusion ; but he was still very curious, and accordingly proposed to look over the house, ostensibly to see how the whitewashing and repapering was progressing.

Not receiving any answer to his knock, he repeated it, this time more loudly.

"No one in," he said to himself, when he had waited a little longer. "I shall have to postpone—h'm ! might try the back door first, though."

He walked round to it, but found that it, too, was shut. The scullery window, however, was open. He noticed this, and smiled.

"I suppose I ought not to," he said, after a brief consideration ; "but I'm going to all the same. It's for a good purpose, and there's not much chance of anyone seeing me."

In another minute he had climbed through the window ; and in three or four more he had visited

and examined the different rooms in the house. The ceilings and walls showed that the work of decoration had been started ; but there was nothing else in any way unusual. In spite of the fact that his ideas as to what he might have found were quite indefinite, he felt very disappointed at the result of the search.

He was about to return to the garden when he remembered the existence of the cellar. Deciding that he might as well have a look at that also, he proceeded downstairs, unlatched the door, and entered. The gas had been left burning ; and he saw before him the gap in the wall, the tools, and the heap of wooden supports, and at once guessed what they signified. An exclamation of triumph broke from his lips. Now, at last, he knew why Powell and Brown had been so anxious to obtain possession of the house ; and now, at last, he could set his wits against theirs in fair fight.

"A tunnel to the jewels!" he muttered. "I suspected many things, but never that. A tunnel to the jewels! And here's—here's—"

The plan Brown and Powell had prepared was lying on the floor, one of them having carelessly dropped it there. Picking it up, he continued excitedly :

"Yes ; here's the whole race-course, from start to finish. This is the cellar, this the chapel, this the burial-place, and this—oh, good, good ! Two to one, three to one, against the tunnel, my sportsmen!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE HYMN-BOOK AND THE MAN

POWELL and Brown had a stormy interview with Miss Grass. They did not succeed in persuading her to give up the idea of restoring Mr. Moon to Primrose Chapel, but they did in convincing her that she could expect no help from them. As Powell himself had inspired her present activity in the matter, she very naturally resented his attitude, and after rating him furiously, concluded the interview by practically turning him and Brown out of her house. Powell was amused, and laughed pleasantly as they walked away. Brown, however, felt hurt and angry, and said :

"I won't stand this sort of thing much longer. You've made me endure countless worries and indignities on account of those jewels. But I tell you plainly I'm getting near the end of my patience."

"Tut, tut!" replied Powell. "Rather talk about getting near the end of our tunnel. We can go ahead now, you know, without fear of interruption by Marmaduke or Minerva. Ha, ha! a delightful conjunction of names that!"

A few minutes later they entered the cellar again. Mr. Cox had left it long before, and there was

nothing in its general appearance to suggest to them that he had ever been in it. The tools, the wooden supports, and the plan were lying on the floor where they had placed them. There was the same gap in the wall and the same heap of bricks opposite.

They laboured hard during the rest of that day, and during the days that followed. Powell grew so enthusiastic that he reduced his allowance of sleep to a minimum, and even brought his lunch with him in the mornings to avoid losing time in going out for it. Brown did not proceed to quite such lengths. Nevertheless, he made a point of putting in at least eight hours a-day at the tunnel, although this necessitated his neglecting his ordinary business almost entirely.

The work progressed. Two things, however, delayed it somewhat. One was the occurrence of a Sunday, when Brown and Powell had to attend the Primrose services, and could only repair to the cellar for short periods. The other was the fact that Miss Summers had arranged that while she was away a certain elderly charwoman should keep the chapel in order. This person disturbed them a good deal by calling at the house for brooms and dusters, and insisting on chatting to Brown about the weather and the state of her health.

Still, by noon on the sixth day from the start, they had carried the tunnel forty feet in the direction indicated by the plan, and were in the immediate neighbourhood of the spot where they supposed the jewels to be. The earth they had excavated half filled the cellar, in spite of its considerable extent. As they looked at the huge

mound, they felt proud of having formed it. But they also felt a little anxious, for they remembered that it would all have to go back where it had come from.

"We may strike the casket any moment now," said Powell, digging fiercely. "Exciting, isn't it? I'm more than ever convinced that our adventures would make a splendid novel. By the way, what do you think of 'The Primrose League' as a title for it?"

"Ha, ha! not at all bad, as a play upon words," replied Brown, who was in a pleasant mood, owing to the prospect of the speedy recovery of the jewels. "Primrose Chapel, of course, with our mutual arrangement as the league. No, not at all bad!"

"Glad you like it. I do myself. It's artistic, and it's attractive. With a little judicious advertising, thousands of copies of the book would be sold to ardent Conservatives."

"And they'd be sold, too, when they found that, instead of being about the Primrose League, it was simply another missing jewels affair. There are such lots of books on that subject already, you know."

"Yes, but in quite a different vein. They thrill and perplex people; this one would amuse them."

"Perhaps," said Brown. "The story certainly has its funny points. I can't help laughing myself when I reflect that the origin of everything was simply a flinty road."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, that if Spottem and I hadn't punctured our bicycle tyres on the night of the burglary, the jewels wouldn't have been buried, nor the chapel have been

built over them, nor I have become a deacon, nor you have—”

“I see,” interrupted Powell, with a laugh. “But I can take you farther back than the flinty road. Do you remember Fluffy Fluff’s first song, *A Little Piece of Fluff*? That was the real origin. If I hadn’t written it for her, she would never have been a music-hall star, never have got a salary of a hundred pounds a-week, and never have been able to buy the jewels. Yes, *A Little Piece of Fluff* was the real origin. Without it there’d have been no burglary, and no puncturing of bicycle tyres. Would there?”

“I suppose not,” replied Brown; and then went on: “When are we coming to them? The tunnel’s about the right length, according to the plan.”

“Just about it. Another foot or two, perhaps. We’ll soon have that down. But first let’s empty these baskets. Mind that bit of candle as you pass.”

They crawled through the tunnel, carrying large baskets filled with the earth last dug out. After shooting it on to the mound in the cellar, they returned, and at once resumed work, Brown with a shovel, and Powell with a pick.

“We must go at it hard now,” remarked Brown. “There’s no time to spare.”

Powell nodded, and wielded the pick vigorously, humming as he did so the refrain:

“I’m a little piece of fluff,
A dear little, queer little piece of fluff . . .
Of fluffy fluffy fluff, of fluffy fluffy fluff . . .”

An hour or two passed without any sign of the jewel casket. They looked at each other questioningly.

"Let's ascertain exactly how far we've gone, and exactly what the right distance is," suggested Brown.

Powell assented, and they proceeded to check the figures on the plan and remeasure the tunnel. When they had done this, Brown said:

"We're well beyond the distance. Something's wrong somewhere."

"And I'll tell you where!" exclaimed Powell. "In the depth of the jewels below the ground level. We estimate it in the plan at ten foot; but really, it's a little more or less."

"Yes, that must be the explanation. Horizontally, we've exact data; the size of the cellar, position of the tree stump, and so on. Vertically, we've only got our recollections."

"True; and mine, at any rate, aren't very clear. Let's consider the point again. First, there's the depth of the ditch where we buried the jewels. That might be anything from three to eight foot. Then there's the depth of the hole itself. That also might be anything from three to eight. Total depth, therefore, six to sixteen foot. I think those are the outside limits."

"The very outside," said Brown. "And now for the tunnel. The plan makes the roof about nine, and the floor thirteen below the ground level."

"Which leaves a double margin of three foot where the jewels might possibly be," commented Powell. "We must try that much down and that much up."

"Yes, I suppose so. Which way first?"

"Down. Come on! As quick as you like!"

They attacked the floor of the tunnel at the line of correct horizontal distance according to the plan,

but although they turned over the earth along and about the line to fully the prescribed depth, they did not find the jewel casket.

"It's very aggravating!" remarked Brown.

"Very," replied Powell. "Still, as they're not below, they must be above. Come on again!"

They attacked the roof as energetically as they had the floor. Both were tired, and both were sweating freely; but both were spurred on, now by hope, and now by fear.

Some minutes passed uneventfully, and then Powell uttered an exclamation of triumph.

"Yes?" questioned Brown eagerly.

"I've touched something hard just there," replied Powell. "It must be the casket. Stand by, while I loosen it."

He struck his pick furiously in the neighbourhood of the spot he had indicated. A torrent of earth fell, but nothing else. Suddenly he dropped the pick, and said :

"Give me a light. We'll have a look."

Brown handed him one of the candles. He lifted it towards the roof, and said :

"There's certainly something showing through."

"It's concrete!" exclaimed Brown, peering up.
"Yes, it's concrete."

"Concrete, and not the casket!" cried Powell, in angry disappointment. "Curse it, what's concrete doing here?"

"There's a bed of it immediately below the chapel."

"But, according to the plan, this is half-a-dozen feet down, and not immediately below. What about that?"

"I'm afraid the plan must be wrong," replied Brown, after a momentary consideration. "It's impossible that the concrete should be that distance down. No builder would have laid it there."

"Where is the wretched thing?"

"The plan? Oh, that's in the cellar. I took it there to be out of the way. Shall I fetch it again?"

"No, we'll go to it. Come on!"

They proceeded through the tunnel, found the plan, and examined it yet once more. Even at the beginning of its existence it had not been a very neat-looking document, Brown having made several alterations and erasures in preparing it. Since then it had been used often and carelessly, and had become dirty and torn. The lines and figures on it, however, were still fairly distinct.

"Yes, I'm afraid it's wrong," remarked Brown. "First in the position of this corner of the cellar floor, and then in—"

"Curse it!" broke in Powell passionately. "Why couldn't you have been exact?"

"I'm no more to blame than you," protested Brown. "We took the measurements together."

"No, you took them; I simply wrote them down at your dictation. But we won't discuss that. Have you got your foot-rule with you?"

"Yes."

"Then run it round the wall. We'll go through everything again, and see just where the mistake is. Possibly it's only in the depth below the ground level."

"Good!" said Brown, producing the rule. "I'll

begin here, and work in this direction, calling out the totals at the corners."

"And I'll compare them with those on the plan," said Powell. "Now mind, be exact this time."

The cellar was very irregular in shape, the idea of the builder having apparently been to facilitate its division into compartments for the storing of different sorts of articles. Altogether, there were about a dozen turns in the wall. Brown did not, however, get beyond the third from the one which was his starting point.

"Eleven foot!" he called out at the first; "Thirteen foot, six inches!" at the second; "Eleven foot!" at the third."

"That'll do!" shouted Powell angrily. "No use going on. They're all wrong."

"By much?"

"Yes, by a foot or more each. Curse it! Again I say curse it! You can put the rule back in your pocket. And as for the plan—well, this for the plan!"

He began to tear it up.

"Stop!" cried Brown.

Powell continued to tear it until he had reduced it to tiny pieces. Scattering these on the floor, he said: "Now I'll stop."

"I don't know what you wanted to do that for," said Brown. "With two or three alterations, the thing might have been all right."

"With a hundred, more likely! No, we've done with plans."

"Well, for the matter of that, I suppose we've done

with the whole business. Miss Summers returns to-morrow night, and—”

“ And long before that the jewels shall be ours,” put in Powell. “ Come on! Into the tunnel again.”

“ What’s the use? We don’t know in what direction to dig.”

“ We soon will, though. Your seat in the chapel is immediately over the jewels, isn’t it?”

“ Yes.”

“ Well, we’ll break through the concrete and up into the chapel. Then we’ll see where your seat is, and then we’ll bore underneath it from the tunnel and get them.”

“ Impossible!” exclaimed Brown. “ We should be discovered.”

“ Oh, no, we shouldn’t. There’s never anyone in the chapel at this time of day.”

“ Besides, we haven’t proper tools for breaking up concrete.”

“ We’ve a pick, and a crowbar, and so on. They’ll do.”

“ But—” began Brown.

“ It’s no use talking,” said Powell impatiently. “ Our difficulty is solely due to your carelessness in preparing the plan, and you’ll have to join me in this way out of it. Blame yourself, not me. Come on!”

Brown sighed, and followed him into the tunnel. A little later they were hammering away at the concrete. Yet a little later someone was standing on the floor above them, listening intently to the noise they were making.

This person was Mr. Cox. They had only just

discovered that the plan was incorrect; but he had known this all along. When, as has been recorded, he picked the plan up in the cellar, he immediately conceived the idea of setting Powell and Brown to work on the wrong path. After a little consideration, he proceeded, with pencil and india-rubber he happened to have with him, to make some alterations, which, while not affecting the length of the tunnel line, increased both its inclination towards the east and its slope upward. Then, as has also been recorded, he departed, leaving everything apparently undisturbed.

Often, during the few days since, he had visited the chapel, and listened to the sounds from below. Occasionally, too, he had visited the cellar, choosing times when the house was empty, and always entering by the scullery window. In these ways he had assured himself that the alterations in the plan had not been noticed, and that Powell and Brown were well off the track. Again and again he had laughed heartily at the thought of their approaching discomfiture.

Now, however, as he heard them attacking the concrete, he did not feel disposed to laugh. He had hoped that they would work on blindly, until the return of Miss Summers forced them to vacate the house. But there was still a full day to pass before then, and the possibility of their constructing a branch tunnel during it occurred to him. Had it occurred to them also? Were they coming up into the chapel to ascertain their position? If so, what was he to do?

He sat down in one of the pews and meditated

Presently he arrived at a decision. He would stay where he was, and, in the event of their coming up, would inform them of his identity with Bill Spottem, and insist on the jewels being restored to Fluffy Fluff, the rightful owner. The consequences of his doing so might be unpleasant so far as he was concerned. Still, he would risk that.

At the end of about an hour the sound of pick meeting concrete ceased, and soon afterwards another of a different sort began. Brown and Powell had reached the floor of the chapel, and were sawing through the boards.

Mr. Cox had been occupying himself by reading a hymn-book. Now he put it down, and fixed his eyes on the place where the opening was being made. This was at the side of the pew immediately in front of that in which he was sitting. When Powell and Brown came up, they would thus be within a yard or two of him, and would see him at once. As he thought of this, and imagined their dismay at the unexpected sight, he smiled happily.

At last a piece of one of the boards was sawn clear, and pushed away from underneath. Then there was a short dialogue between the two workers, which Mr. Cox could hear.

"Can you get your head through?" asked Brown.

"No," replied Powell. "Another board will have to be removed. Will you take the saw for a bit?"

"All right!"

In a few more minutes a parallel piece of the next board was also sawn clear and pushed away.

"Good!" exclaimed Powell. "That's large enough."

"Yes," said Brown. "The question is, though, how we are going to raise ourselves up to it."

They were standing on a box they had brought into the tunnel. But, in spite of this, they could only just reach the opening with their hands.

"I'll kneel, and you shall jump on to my shoulders," said Powell, after a moment's consideration. "Come on!"

Mr. Cox had been wondering which of the two would emerge first; but now he knew. Again he smiled happily. Brown was as a rule so thoroughly orderly and respectable, that there would be a peculiar pleasure in catching him playing Jack-in-the-Box.

"Yes, that's what it is—Jack-in-the-Box," he said to himself, and then, picking up the hymn-book he had been reading a little while before, he added: "And—and I've a good mind to put the lid on. I will, too, if he's facing the other way."

He tightened his grip on the book, and crouched forward. As he did so, he heard Powell mutter, "What are you waiting for?" and Brown reply, "All right! Don't move!"

A moment later Brown's head shot up. While it was still rising, Mr. Cox brought the book down with considerable force on the back part of it, which was turned towards him. The book was a large, heavy one, containing the music as well as the words of the hymns, and very stoutly bound. Half stunned by the blow, Brown dropped to the bottom of the tunnel,

carrying Powell with him, and upsetting the box on which they had been standing.

"I've put the lid on with a vengeance," said Mr. Cox to himself. "Heavens, what language that fellow is using!"

Powell was the fellow referred to. He was not much hurt by the fall; but he was startled and angry, and was relieving his feelings by swearing at Brown.

"What did you do it for?" he asked, in conclusion. "Don't lie there like a fool! Get up, and tell me what you did it for!"

Brown staggered to his feet, and replied confusedly:

"I didn't do it purposely. My head knocked against a pew, I think. Yes, that must have been it! I jumped up quickly, forgetting there might be something in the way. My head aches terribly."

"And serve you jolly well right! I'll get a couple more boxes from the cellar, and climb up by myself. You're not to be trusted, except with the collection plate."

"It's no use."

"What's no use?"

"Your climbing up! I'm sick of the whole business, and I'm going to chuck it!"

"I'll be hanged if you are!" exclaimed Powell. "Not before we've got the jewels, at any rate!"

"Yes, at once!" said Brown doggedly. "This accident has decided me."

"Don't talk nonsense! Why, another hour's work will give them to us!"

"I refuse to dig an inch further."

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“Then I’ll do it alone !”

“No, you won’t !”

“Curse you, what do you mean ?” cried Powell fiercely. “I’ll knock you down with this shovel if you say much more !”

“And curse you, too,” cried Brown, in tones as fierce as his. “Drop that shovel, or I’ll make a hole in you with this pick.”

For a moment or two they threatened each other with the weapons they had picked up. Then Powell said, with a short laugh :

“I’m surprised at you, Brown. This violence ill becomes you, as a deacon of Primrose Chapel. Now, just control your temper, and tell me soberly why you refuse to dig on yourself, or even to let me do so.”

“I’ve told you. I’m sick of the whole business, and I intend to start filling up the tunnel at once.”

“But we can’t be far from the jewels. Be reasonable, and let’s get them first.”

“No !” replied Brown emphatically. “I’ve nearly broken my neck already, and that’s enough for me. Besides, there’s no time to be lost in filling the tunnel. If Miss Summers returned and found it open, I should be ruined. Matters would have to be explained, and all the chapel people would learn that I had once been a burglar, and would have nothing more to do with me. I should lose in an hour the social position which has cost me years of hard and honest labour.”

“Oh, blow your social position !” said Powell. “I’m going to see where the jewels are, and cut through to them. My mind’s made up.”

"And so's mine. You've been bullying and ordering me about for months. But you won't any longer."

Powell muttered an oath.

"It's no use your swearing," said Brown. "You'd much better accept my view quietly, and help me fill up the tunnel. Look here! if you'll consent to that, I think I can promise—"

He paused, as if he had begun impulsively, and was now doubtful whether he ought to finish.

"Well, what?" questioned Powell.

Brown remained silent a little longer, and then said :

"In that event, I think I can promise to find another and a safer way to get the jewels. Yes, I'm sure I can."

"Do you take me for a fool?" asked Powell. "Do you suppose I'm going to sit down and play with my thumbs while you're searching for this other way? Why, you'd never find it!"

"Oh, yes, I would."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't."

"I've found it already, if it comes to that," said Brown, annoyed by his contemptuous tone. "I didn't mean to tell you now; but I will, all the same. Do you remember Mr. Cox stating at the general meeting last week that there was a mortgage on the chapel?"

"I do."

"Well, I hold it. Mr. Goodman left it to me, with the rest of his property. He built the chapel at his own expense, you know, and then handed it over to trustees."

"Subject to this mortgage?"

"Yes. The chapel cost him four thousand pounds, and, on the principle of helping those who help themselves, he stipulated that the congregation should ultimately repay him two, the amount being secured on the chapel itself by formal deed from the trustees."

"I see!" exclaimed Powell. "The mortgage is for two thousand, and you hold it; and no part of it has been discharged?"

"Precisely. And—"

"And," continued Powell excitedly, "the deed contains the usual foreclosure clause; and you're going to demand that the whole two thousand be paid off within the period named; and if it isn't, you'll foreclose on the chapel; and then—and then we'll dig the jewels out of our own property, so to speak, with no possibility of interruption. That's the idea, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied Brown. "It occurred to me some time ago; but I kept it for a last resource. The step's a serious one. Still, it's not quite so serious as it seems; for I intend to renew the mortgage to the trustees directly we've got the jewels."

"I like the idea," said Powell, after a short silence. "But—but suppose the chapel people raise the two thousand, and pay up?"

"They won't," replied Brown. "They're not a rich body, and the period the foreclosure clause gives them to do it in is only a month. Besides, they'll be hoping all along that I'll change my mind."

"That's true," said Powell, with a laugh. "They don't know what a hardened old miscreant you are."

"I wish you wouldn't use such insulting terms, even

in jest. I told you that I intend to renew the mortgage directly we've—”

“All right! Beg pardon!” put in Powell. “Well, now, the position, as I understand it, is this: If I join you in filling up the tunnel, you'll at once issue notice of foreclosure. Is that it?”

“It is. And, at the end of a month, we'll be able to get the jewels without any trouble or scandal. Do you agree?”

“Yes, I agree. I'd much rather, for many reasons, persevere with the present attempt. Still, I agree. I like the idea. It's neat; and it's funny. Old Cox will be a bit sick when he hears you are going to take the chapel from him. He'll think you are doing it in revenge for his opposition to that removal scheme of ours. Ha ha!”

This speech, and, indeed, the whole conversation, was heard by Mr. Cox. He smiled grimly at the allusion to himself, and after a momentary consideration rose from his seat near the hole, stepped quietly to the pulpit, and hid himself behind it. The change in the plan of campaign of Powell and Brown had removed the necessity for an immediate interview with them, and he did not wish them to discover him in the chapel. But he felt that, before going, he ought to be certain that they were actually filling up the tunnel.

An hour later he left, quite satisfied on this point. Powell had appeared at the mouth of the hole, had announced, as the result of his survey, that the jewels were only nine or ten feet from one of the walls of the tunnel, and had again tried, but again failed, to persuade Brown to consent to cut through to them.

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Then they had replaced the two pieces of board, and made them fast by nailing other pieces across them underneath. And then they had started shovelling back the huge mound of earth they had formed in the cellar, a task which would probably, Mr. Cox reflected with some satisfaction, keep them up all night, as it had to be completed before the return of Miss Summers the next day.

CHAPTER XVII

AN EMPTY COLLECTION PLATE

WITHIN twenty-four hours the tunnel was filled up and the cellar restored to its former appearance. As Mr. Cox had anticipated, Brown and Powell had had to work right through the night. The strain on them had been tremendous, and, during the last hours they had both nearly broken down. Powell, indeed, had only managed to continue under the stimulating influence of occasional sips of brandy.

But after a long sleep they were sufficiently recovered to attend to the mortgage business. The foreclosure clause in the deed was very simple. It provided that the mortgagee, who was now Brown, should give written notice to the trustees of his intention to terminate the mortgage, and that, if the amount of the loan and interest due was not paid to him before the expiration of a calendar month from the date of the notice, he should thereupon be entitled to enter into possession of the chapel and its appurtenances, and sell or otherwise dispose of them. The trustees were the minister and deacons of the chapel for the time being, and Brown at first proposed to address them collectively under cover to Mr. Cox. Powell, however, thought that it would be safer to send each

of them a separate notice, and in the end this was done.

"It'll be a terrible month for me," said Brown, as he dropped the envelopes containing the notices into a pillar-box.

"How do you mean?" said Powell.

"Oh, all the congregation will hear that I'm going to terminate the mortgage, and will resent it strongly. They'll cut me in the street; they'll refuse to shake hands with me at the chapel door on Sundays; they won't put a single penny in the collection plate when I bring it round."

Powell laughed.

"Where does the joke come in?" asked Brown indignantly.

"In the collection plate," replied Powell, with another laugh. "Yes, in the collection plate."

Brown frowned, and after a short silence he resumed:

"A terrible month! Those of them who don't take that attitude will be constantly trying to persuade me to withdraw the notices. There's Mrs. Kronk, for instance. She'll be at me to do so every time we sit down to meals together. All I hope is that I shall be able to keep firm."

"You'll have to. You backed out of the tunnel attempt; but you're not going to back out of this one."

"I don't intend to. Still, I wish the month were over. I shall not have much peace until it is."

"Look here; suppose we spend it at the seaside, instead of in this neighbourhood?" suggested Powell. "We've both been working very hard, and are both

rather run down. The holiday would do us good, and would also avoid the unpleasantness you fear."

"It certainly would," said Brown, his face brightening. "There's my business to think of, though. My foreman's pretty smart; but I shouldn't like to leave him in sole charge for a month straight off."

"That's all right! We'll go somewhere within easy reach, so that, if necessary, you can come up for an hour or two occasionally to see to things. How about Brighton? Quick trains, you know, and plenty of life. Shall we go there?"

"Yes," replied Brown, with sudden resolution. "And what's more, we'll go to-day, before these notices are delivered. And we won't tell anyone where we are going."

Some hours later they entered a Brighton train. Brown had arranged with his foreman to complete the whitewashing and repapering of Miss Summers' house, and to proceed with the other work in hand. He had also managed to get through a farewell interview with Mrs. Kronk so hurriedly that she had no time to question him as to the nature of the important business which, he informed her, called him away. Powell had secured a substitute for himself as the Primrose organist, and had given him a letter of introduction to Mr. Cox. Both, in fact, had done all that seemed necessary or advisable in the circumstances, and both looked forward to a quiet and pleasant holiday.

On the Sunday following this it became generally known among the congregation that Brown proposed to determine the mortgage. The deacons had re-

ceived the notice, and they and their wives mentioned it to all whom they met during the period of social intercourse before and after each service. By the end of the day everybody of any importance in the chapel had heard the news. The feeling against Brown was very strong. It was thought that his action was due to temporary annoyance at the defeat of his removal scheme, and that, with a little persuasion, he would agree to withdraw the notice; but it was also thought that, instead of condescending to persuasion, the congregation should in some way or other get together the two thousand pounds required to redeem the mortgage.

A good part of the month passed, however, without any definite steps in this direction being taken. The cause of the inaction was Mr. Cox. It was expected that, as minister of the chapel, he would assume the lead in the matter. He did not do so. On the contrary, he consistently deprecated the idea of raising the money, urging that the task would be exceedingly difficult, and that it was not necessary, as there was no doubt that Brown would, on his return to London, consent to renew the loan. There was some murmuring among the congregation at his attitude. Still, but for Miss Minerva Grass, they would probably have done nothing, and Mr. Cox would have been allowed to deal with Brown and Powell on lines that he, with a full knowledge of their real purpose, had decided upon.

Only ten days of the month were left, when Miss Grass realised the possibilities of the situation. Primrose Chapel was in a difficulty; and Primrose Chapel was dissatisfied with its minister. The time

had come, she felt, for the restoration of the Rev. Marmaduke Moon ; the conditions could never be more favourable to it than they were now. She and he, who was again living in the neighbourhood, would bring it about by getting Primrose Chapel out of its difficulty, and increasing its dissatisfaction with its minister. Ten days was not a long period, but it would be long enough if they worked energetically.

They did, indeed, work energetically. On the very first day they won over Mr. Lambert, who was particularly angry at Mr. Cox's apathy, and induced him to act as treasurer of a fund for the redemption of the mortgage. This helped them greatly, Mr. Lambert being a deacon, and a man of considerable influence. Every day they gained more converts ; and every day fresh sums were added to the fund. Miss Grass went about from house to house, praising Mr. Moon and depreciating Mr. Cox to members of the congregation. A little while before they would have laughed at her ; now they listened attentively. Mr. Moon did not canvass personally, but he wrote many persuasive letters, and his name stood at the head of the list of subscribers to the fund.

In spite of the efforts of the enemy, there were some members who remained steadfast in their allegiance to Mr. Cox. Amongst these were Mrs. Kronk and Miss Summers. They had been two of the principal agents in procuring for him the appointment of minister, and, when they heard what was going on they joined forces, and did all they could to prevent Mr. Moon recapturing it from him. But this was not much ; for they were handicapped by the position he himself had taken up, and by the absence

of Brown from London, and the impossibility of communicating with him.

Early on the morning of the last day of the month, Miss Summers decided to have another talk with Mrs. Kronk on the subject, and started to walk to her house. At almost exactly the same moment Mrs. Kronk started to walk to Miss Summers' house. They met half-way.

"I was coming to see you!" exclaimed Miss Summers.

"And I to see you," replied Mrs. Kronk. "I've found out where Mr. Brown is."

"Oh, where?"

"At Brighton. I went round to his place of business yesterday evening, and made his foreman tell me. He has known all the time, although, when I asked him before, he said he didn't. It seems that Mr. Brown has been corresponding with him regularly during the month."

"It's a curious affair," remarked Miss Summers.

"It is," assented Mrs. Kronk grimly. "And I mean to get to the bottom of it. Before this morning's out I shall be in Brighton. I thought I'd call on you first; but, now that we've met, I shall go straight to the station. You might walk with me in that direction, if you've nothing else to do."

"All right! Come on! This is the best turning. By the way, whereabouts in Brighton is Mr. Brown staying?"

"I've no idea! The only address he gives in his letters is the post office there."

"Then how—" began Miss Summers.

"How shall I find him?" put in Mrs. Kronk. "By

looking for him. I'll search the whole town through if necessary."

"H'm, rather a big job!"

"Yes, but it doesn't frighten me. I shall find him, and what is more, I shall make him renew that mortgage. Mark my words, there'll be no foreclosure to-morrow."

"I hope not," replied Miss Summers.

But she was not at all confident on the point. Indeed, when she returned home, after having seen Mrs. Kronk part of the way to the station, she felt that the chances of the chapel being saved were so small that it was not worth while to dust and air it as she usually did at that time of morning. Accordingly, she sat down and began to read a novel instead.

An hour or two passed, and then she was disturbed by a knock. She put down the novel, went to the door, and opened it. The person who had knocked was Powell. He had come up from Brighton on the previous evening, in order to make arrangements for the disposal of the jewels, about the recovery of which he now entertained no doubt. Brown, however, being still afraid of the anger of the congregation, had decided not to return until the actual day of foreclosure.

"How are you?" said Powell, stepping inside directly the door was open. "And how have the music halls been treating you?"

This was their first meeting since the night on which she had quarrelled with him and ordered him out of the house. But she received him cordially, partly because she was a little ashamed of her

violence that night, and partly because she was really glad to see him.

"They've been treating me badly," she replied, shaking hands with him. "Very badly!"

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "you ought to have taken my advice. With up-to-date songs, and a big London show, you'd have been all right. But with a provincial hall and old songs—well, what could you expect?"

"What I got, I suppose; and that wasn't pleasant. I assure you, Dick, that some of the people actually yawned at me. Think of that! I almost cried when I saw them. There was once a time when I used to wake people up, not send them to sleep."

"And you could do so now if you had a proper chance," said Powell sympathetically. "By the way, what songs did you give?"

She mentioned the titles of two. He leaned back in the chair in which he had seated himself, sighed, and said:

"Both quite impossible; dead as Jonah. The only one of your old songs worth anything at the present time is *A Little Piece of Fluff*. Why didn't you give that?"

"Oh, I don't know! Perhaps because you wrote it. I wasn't very friendly towards you just then."

"But you are now?"

"I should be if—"

"If I were to keep my promise about those jewels?" he broke in. "Well, Fluffy, I'm going to. Half of them shall be restored to you. I'm not joking. Upon my honour, they shall."

"I'll believe you when I see them."

"And that," he said, with a benevolent smile, "will be to-morrow, without fail."

He spoke confidently, for he felt certain of the foreclosure being effected and the jewels recovered the next day, and Brown had agreed to relinquish his half of them to Fluffy Fluff upon Powell's producing her.

"Without fail?" she repeated, somewhat impressed by his tone. "Do you mean that at last you have found your old partner, Bill Spottem, and made him disgorge?"

"I'll explain everything to-morrow," he replied, with another benevolent smile. "In the meantime, you must trust me, and you'll be perfectly safe in doing so. Look here, Fluffy, I'm sincerely sorry that that burglary resulted so unfortunately for you, and I intend to make generous amends. Not only will I restore half the jewels to you, but I'll also assist you to regain your former position in the music-hall world. Yes, I'll write you a couple of new songs, and put some topical verses to *A Little Piece of Fluff*. Then, with a London show, you'll be all right."

"It sounds very nice."

"Yes, and every bit of it will come true. But now let's talk about something else. What's been happening at Primrose Chapel? I've been at Brighton a month, and am quite out of touch with things."

"At Brighton!" she cried. "Why, that's where Mr. Brown is! Have you been staying with him? And are you mixed up in that mortgage business? I've several times thought you might be. Are you?"

"What—what do you mean?" stammered Powell, taken off his guard. "And how—how did you learn that Brown is at Brighton?"

"Ah! I see you know all about it. Don't pretend ignorance. Tell me why he has given notice to redeem the mortgage on the chapel."

"If he's done so, I suppose it's because he wants to be paid," replied Powell, recovering himself. "I can't imagine any other reason."

"Well, he'll probably get his money. But he's managed to split up the chapel into two rival parties. There have been some strange developments since he gave the notice. At first nothing was done, as Mr. Cox thought Mr. Brown would renew the mortgage if asked to. Some of the congregation thought differently, however, and a few days ago a fund for its redemption was started by your friend Miss Grass."

"No friend of mine!" he exclaimed angrily. "What the deuce did she want to start the fund for?"

"For the sake of Mr. Moon, the former minister," replied Miss Summers, with a laugh. "She hopes to pay off the mortgage, and, as a sort of corollary, to restore him to the Primrose pulpit. And I'm afraid she'll succeed. The party in favour of him, as opposed to Mr. Cox, is growing every hour."

"But the fund? What about the fund?"

"Oh, that's growing too. I don't know exactly how it stands; but I've heard that Miss Grass is confident of completing it in time."

Powell was staggered by the news. At about the middle of the month he had come up to London, had

met the friend of his who was acting as organist of the chapel while he was away, had learned from him that no effort was being made to get the two thousand pounds together, and then had returned to Brighton, satisfied that the foreclosure would in due course be effected. To be told now that it would probably not be was a terrible blow.

"Have you a time-table?" he asked, after a brief silence. "Brighton trains, I mean."

"Here's an ABC," she replied, handing him one. "That'll give them. Are you going there again?"

"Perhaps."

"To see Mr. Brown? If you persuaded him to renew the mortgage, you would upset Miss Grass's plans. People would feel that Mr. Cox had been right in his attitude, and wouldn't be so eager about Mr. Moon."

"Oh, yes, I understand! Let me think; the next train starts at twelve. Can I catch that? Hardly time enough."

"By the way," remarked Miss Summers, "did I tell you that Mrs. Kronk has gone to Brighton?"

"Mrs. Kronk? Surely not!"

"Yes. She found out yesterday that Mr. Brown was there, and went down this morning. I believe she means to make him—"

"Curse it! Curse it!" broke in Powell. "I beg your pardon, Flissy, but there's far more at stake than you imagine. What train did she go by?"

"The ten o'clock."

"Then if I catch the twelve o'clock, I shall only be a couple of hours behind her. I must do it. Good-bye, Flissy, good-bye Yes, I must do it."

"But how are you affected by Mrs. Kronk's—" she began.

"I can't stop to explain. Wait till to-morrow. Where's my hat? Thanks! Good-bye!"

He rushed out of the house, and down the path leading to the road. The recovery of the jewels the next day was no longer a certainty; either Miss Grass or Mrs. Kronk might prevent it, by keeping Brown from foreclosing. But there was still a chance. He would rejoin Brown as quickly as possible, rescue him from Mrs. Kronk, and compel him to try to outwit Miss Grass.

As he turned into the road from the path, he collided with a man coming in the opposite direction. He muttered an apology, and was rushing on again, when the man exclaimed :

"What, you, Mr. Powell! I wanted to speak to you. Where've you been all this time?"

Powell glanced round, saw that the man was Mr. Cox, and said :

"Ah! how do you do? I didn't notice it was you. I'm afraid I can't stay, though. Train to catch."

"But just a minute!" said Mr. Cox.

"Even that's impossible. Awfully sorry! Must catch the train."

He waved his hand in farewell, turned, and hurried along the road. Mr. Cox looked after him until he reached a corner and passed out of sight. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he muttered :

"All right, my friend, you and I will settle our accounts some other day. Now I'll interview Miss Summers."

A minute or two later he was sitting with her in her parlour. After a few general remarks, he said :

"I've called, Miss Summers, to ask you for the keys of the chapel. This is the last day for redeeming the mortgage, and—"

"Oh, that wretched mortgage!" she exclaimed. "It's upsetting everybody. Mr. Powell has just been talking to me about it, and I'm convinced that—"

She stopped abruptly.

"Yes?" he questioned.

"I'm convinced," she said, making up her mind to continue, "that there's something underhanded going on. Mr. Powell's a sort of friend of mine, and I don't like to say anything against him. I feel certain, though, that he induced Mr. Brown to give the foreclosure notice, and that he has been keeping him out of the way ever since. What his reason is I don't know."

"But I do," said Mr. Cox excitedly. "You're quite right; there is something underhanded going on."

"What? Tell me what. Perhaps I can help to stop it. I'd do all I could, if only for the sake of poor Mr. Goodman. He was so kind to me that I hate to think that the chapel he founded should come to grief. Of course, it's on the cards that Miss Grass and Mr. Moon will get together the two thousand pounds in time. But even if they do, matters won't be much improved. The congregation will be divided between you and Mr. Moon, and—and—"

"And I may be turned out, and he be reappointed as minister?" suggested Mr. Cox, with a sad smile
"That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, it is. But I should be very sorry if it happened. Let me again ask you what is at the bottom of the affair. Tell me, for I really think I might be able to help."

For some moments Mr. Cox looked at her irresolutely. Then, in agitated tones, he said:

"It's quite impossible for you to do anything, Miss Summers. Still, I'll tell you. You're a good little woman, and you'll sympathise with me in my unfortunate position; and Heaven knows I need sympathy. Besides, everybody in the congregation will have heard about it before long. You may as well be the first as the last.

"I'd better begin with myself. I'm now the minister of Primrose Chapel, and an all-round respectable man; but I've been very different things in my time. Yes, I, the Rev. William Cox, was once a bookmaker and burglar known as Bill Spottem. I'm ashamed to—"

"Bill Spottem!" she exclaimed. "Did you say Bill Spottem?"

"Yes," he replied, wondering at the manner in which she received the name.

"The one who was concerned in the Fluffy Fluff burglary years ago? Quick! are you that Bill Spottem?"

"Yes," he faltered. "But how—"

"Give me my jewels!" she cried, jumping up and seizing him by the arm. "I'm Fluffy Fluff. Give them me! Do you hear? I tell you I'm Fluffy

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Fluff—Fluffy Fluff herself. Give me my jewels at once!"

He stared at her, dumb with surprise. She shook his arm furiously, and then suddenly let go of it, and with a hysterical laugh said :

"I'm sorry that I rushed at you like that. Forgive me ; put it down to excitement. But—but have you got my jewels ? Mr. Powell assured me that Bill Spottem had them still, and if you're Bill Spottem, then— But it can't, it can't be true that you are !"

She paused, and looked at him appealingly.

"It's quite true," he said, forcing himself to speak.
"And if it's also true that you are Fluffy Fluff—"

"Ah ! I'll soon prove that I am. Wait a moment."

She ran to a cupboard at the other end of the room, opened it, and took out some papers.

"See for yourself," she said, bringing them to him. "Here's my portrait in the *Entr'acte* as Fluffy Fluff, and here's another in the *Pelican*. And here's an old agreement between me and the Oxford people. And here are letters addressed to me by different people. This one is from Mr. Powell, whose writing you of course recognise. It begins, 'Dear Fluffy,' and—"

"I'm quite satisfied," interrupted Mr. Cox. "But the circumstances are really most extraordinary. You at the chapel ; Mr. Brown, Mr. Powell, and I, the three burglars who stole your jewels, also at the chapel ; the jewels themselves under the chapel. Most extraordinary !"

"Mr. Brown the third burglar ! The jewels under the chapel ! What do you mean ?"

"Then you only know that—"

"That you and Mr. Powell were two of the burglars, and that you, if you really are Bill Spottem, got away with the jewels when the others were caught. What else is there to know? Tell me, tell me! My head's in a whirl with the excitement."

"I'll tell you everything," replied Mr. Cox. "But it's rather a long story."

"Go on. Make it as short as possible."

He proceeded to give her an account of the burial of the jewels by Brown and Powell at a spot unknown to him; of his coming to Primrose Chapel, meeting Brown there, and being unrecognised by him owing to the great changes in his appearance; of the subsequent arrival of Powell; of the various attempts to obtain the jewels; and of the way in which he had learned the exact whereabouts of the burial-place. She listened eagerly, and at last broke in with:

"That's enough! I understand. A nice pair! Who'd have thought it of Brown? But I suppose Powell led him on, and is most to blame."

"Undoubtedly," he replied. "Still, this mortgage idea is Brown's."

"And you intended to let him carry it through successfully? Shame on you, Mr. Cox!"

"No, no, I didn't!"

"But I say yes. Here we are on the very eve of the foreclosure, and you've done nothing to prevent it."

"I'd decided to do something to-day, though. I know it looks bad my having waited so long; but you must remember that I had a very difficult race to ride. I was handicapped by Powell and Brown being out of town, and also by the consideration that directly

they learned I was Spottem they'd be able to have me arrested as an unpunished burglar, if they wanted to. Then, too, I'm sorry to say I was once or twice sorely tempted to go shares with them, and—"

"I see. To put it plainly, you've been shirking your duty, and generally fooling about all the month."

"But," he protested, "I'd decided to—"

"Ah, yes; you'd decided to do something to-day. Well, what?"

"To place the matter in the hands of the police. I came to you for the keys of the chapel, with the intention of taking them to Scotland Yard, and explaining just how things stood. Then the police could have got a search warrant, dug up the jewels, and restored them to Miss Fluffy Fluff—that is to say, to you. Of course, I should have been endangering my liberty, and—"

He paused, with a shrug of his shoulders. She laughed, and said :

"And you've no particular wish to lose that? Well, we won't trouble the police, but dig the jewels up ourselves. You know exactly where they are?"

"According to that tunnel plan I was telling you about, they're ten foot below Mr. Brown's seat in the chapel. But I'm afraid we shouldn't reach them without being interrupted."

"Oh, yes, we should! Powell and Brown are at Brighton, and if we start at once, we'll have finished long before they return."

"Still, any member of the congregation might pass, hear the noise, and look in. It's that possibility

which has kept me from having a shot at them myself all this time."

"But it won't keep me. Look here, it would be simply ridiculous to call in the police. You'd be locked up, and Primrose Chapel made a public scandal. Besides, I should have to wait for my jewels. The authorities would hold an inquest on them, or put them in Chancery, or some red tape business of that sort; and the delay would drive me mad. No, we must dig them up ourselves. Surely you agree with me that that's the best course?"

"Well, perhaps it is," he replied. "After all, I'm the minister and you're the attendant of the chapel, and we're thus both entitled to be in it when we want to. And even if we are interrupted, we can—"

"Give some plausible explanation of what we are doing?" continued Miss Summers. "Of course we can; and of course we will. But now let's consider what tools we shall need, and how we are to get them. That's the first thing."

"Yes," assented Mr. Cox, "that's the first thing."

CHAPTER XVIII

A KISS AT BRIGHTON

ON arriving at Brighton, Mrs. Kronk carefully examined the visitors' list in a local paper, in the hope of learning where Brown was staying. It was limited, however, to the people at the big hotels and boarding-houses, and, as he was not one of these, she did not find his name in it. Although disappointed at the check, she was still determined to have a talk with him that day. Accordingly, she proceeded to the sea front, which seemed the likeliest place for a meeting, and sauntered up and down, looking for him among the crowd of promenaders there.

At last she saw him. He had been sitting on the pier, and was leaving it by one of the turnstiles. She hurried up to him, and exclaimed :

“ Ah, here you are, Mr. Brown ! ”

He started back, and then, recovering from the surprise, shook hands with her coldly, and said in annoyed tones :

“ How do you do ? And may I ask what brings you to Brighton ? I trust there is nothing wrong with our house ? ”

“ No ; but there's something wrong with Primrose Chapel ; and it's that which brings me to Brighton.

Why are you terminating the mortgage on the chapel?"

"Because—because—"

"Yes?"

"Well, because I choose to. I really cannot allow you to question me on the subject, Mrs. Kronk. It would be a foolish state of affairs if a business man were liable to be called to account by his housekeeper for every step he took. Would it not?"

She looked at him indignantly, but did not speak.

"Surely," he persisted, "you can see that it would? Consider, for instance, that—"

"Before you say any more, Mr. Brown," she interrupted, "I had better inform you that I am certain this is not an ordinary business step. Last night I made a curious discovery."

"A curious discovery?" he repeated.

She nodded. He glanced round nervously. Several people were standing near them, and he was afraid they might be overheard.

"Do you mind coming on to the pier, Mrs. Kronk?" he said. "We should be quieter there."

"Just as you like."

They passed through the turnstile, and walked on until they reached a secluded corner, where they sat down.

"And now," he said, "tell me what was the discovery you made last night?"

He looked at her anxiously as he spoke. What was it? While walking up the pier with her, he had again and again asked himself this question, and his uneasy conscience had suggested various replies. None of them was, however, the right one.

"The discovery," she said slowly, "was a bag in the cupboard in your room."

"Good heavens! You mean—"

"Yes, I mean the bag containing burglars' tools on the bottom shelf. You're a whitened sepulchre, Mr. Brown. Under pretence of being a builder, you practise the disgraceful calling of a burglar."

"No, no!"

"Everything points to it. There are those tools. Then there is the fact that when we first met, Mr. Goodman gave me to understand that you had been leading an evil life. Then, too, some weeks ago, I heard you go out of the house at midnight, and return at four in the morning, doubtless after having committed a burglary somewhere."

"No, no! I had simply been engaged in filling up a tunnel."

"Filling up a tunnel! What tunnel? And why filling it up?"

"I can't explain," he replied agitatedly. "I oughtn't to have mentioned it. But I assure you, Mrs. Kronk, that whatever I may have been once, I am not a burglar now. The bag of tools is not mine. It belongs to Mr.—but no, I mustn't tell you his name."

He looked at her appealingly. He had always been particularly desirous of her good opinion, and he was quite unnerved by this unexpected attack from her. It did not even occur to him to ask how she came to open the cupboard and see the bag, which was the one he had taken from Powell on the night he had found him in the chapel attempting to dig up the jewels. All he could

think of was that she had stumbled on to the shady side of his life, and that, if she spoke of it to others, the edifice of respectability he had constructed during the past two or three years would soon crumble away.

"Why mustn't you?" she said, in more gentle tones. "Better do so. At any rate, tell me the truth about the mortgage. Why did you give notice to end it, and then go away and hide yourself? What is at the bottom of the affair?"

By a curious coincidence, she put this question to him at precisely the same time that Miss Summers, as has already been recorded, put it to Mr. Cox. Like Mr. Cox, he hesitated for a few moments, and then, after a plea for sympathy, began the story of the Fluffy Fluff jewels. Mrs. Kronk listened to it in Brighton with almost as much interest as Miss Summers did in London.

"And so you see," he concluded, "I am not quite so bad as you thought. In my heart I desire only the welfare of Primrose Chapel. I am the victim of circumstances, or rather, the victim of Mr. Powell."

"You ought not to have allowed yourself to be," she commented. "You ought to have refused to aid him in getting the jewels."

"My position was a very difficult one, Mrs. Kronk. He threatened to expose me to everybody if I didn't, and I couldn't bear the idea of you and the rest of the chapel people learning that I had been a burglar. I know I have acted wrongly, but—"

"But," she broke in, "you mean to act rightly now?"

"I should like to."

"And surely you will? All you have to do is to renew the mortgage, and inform the police where the jewels are. Then you won't be troubled by Mr. Powell any more."

"But I shall be by other people."

"In what way?"

"In every way," he replied in mournful tones. "Oh, Mrs. Kronk, it would be such a blow to me if my past became generally known. I should have to give up my deaconship at Primrose Chapel. My friends would turn their backs on me. I should almost wish that I were dead."

"Don't talk like that!"

"I can't help it. All that I hold dear would be gone, and I should be alone and hopeless."

"No, you wouldn't," she replied pityingly. "I would stand by you."

"It is good of you to say that. But—but—"

"But what? Do you mean that you'd rather I didn't stand by you?"

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "Ever since the first day I met you, Mrs. Kronk, I have admired and respected you. I value your friendship more highly than you can imagine, and if I were sure it would continue, I think I could bring myself to face the scorn of the rest of the world."

"Well, I promise that it shall continue," she said. "I like you, and I will do my best to help you to live down any unpleasantness this jewel business may cause."

He took her hand, and pressed it in gratitude. She smiled, and said:

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"Don't do that, or those people on the other side of the pier will think we're getting sentimental."

He started, looked at her irresolutely for a moment or two, and then, still holding her hand, he said impetuously :

"Let them think. Listen, Mrs. Kronk! You told me just now that you like me. Do you do so sufficiently to marry me? Will you, will you be my wife?"

"I'm surprised—" she began.

"I know the question seems abrupt," he continued ; "but won't you say 'Yes' ? I'm sure we should be happy. Since Mr. Goodman died, we've been drawn more closely together, and—"

"Stop, Mr. Brown!" she broke in, with a nervous laugh. "I like you, but I'm afraid not in that way. Besides, I'm too old to marry again. Why, I'm forty-six !"

"And I'm forty-five; so that doesn't matter. Won't you say 'Yes' ?"

"I can't. It's altogether too sudden. I don't believe the idea occurred to you until I made that remark about the people opposite thinking we were getting sentimental."

"Oh, yes, it did! It's been in my mind a long time, and I've often been on the point of asking you. Your kindness in promising to continue my friend whatever might happen encouraged me to speak now. But in any case, I should have done so sooner or later."

"Will you give me a week or two to consider it ?" she asked. "It really is too sudden."

"Not a single day," he replied. "Say 'Yes,' Mrs.

Kronk. If you do, I will at once carry out your wishes as to the mortgage and the Fluffy Fluff jewels, and cheerfully endure the consequences. I'm sure we should be happy together. Mrs. Kronk—Rachel—say 'Yes!'"

This was the first time he had called her by her Christian name. She blushed a little, but appeared to be pleased rather than offended. He perceived this, and continued :

"Please, Rachel! You'll never regret it. Please, please, Rachel!"

"I didn't know you could talk in this way," she remarked, with another nervous laugh. "I thought you were always practical and business-like, Mr. Brown."

"Say James, not Mr. Brown!" he exclaimed, with an ardour that astonished even himself. "And please, please say 'Yes'!"

She hesitated for a moment or two, and then made up her mind.

"Very well," she murmured, "I will."

"Will marry me? Will be my wife?"

"Yes, James. But don't, don't! You really mustn't! It's broad daylight. Don't, I tell you!"

In spite of her protests, he kissed her. He felt very happy. She was just the woman for him; used to his ways, possessed of a small private income, and eminently respectable. As he had said, the idea of proposing marriage to her had been in his mind a long time. He had carried it out, he reflected, at an opportune moment. With her by his side, he would be able to end his worries about the jewels, and yet probably maintain the social position he valued so

highly. She, also, felt very happy. Like many widows and many lady housekeepers, she was favourably inclined to marriage ; and he had seemed to her a possible husband quite as long as she had to him a possible wife. The ardent nature of his wooing particularly pleased her, for she attributed it solely to her personal attraction for him, instead of, as was the case, partly to that, and partly to his desire to be sure of at least one influential friend and supporter at Primrose Chapel in the approaching hour of trial.

They sat on the pier for a few more minutes, and then went into the town and had lunch together. Afterwards he suggested that they should buy the engagement ring that afternoon, and she consented, with widowly promptness. There was a jeweller's shop two or three doors from the restaurant where they had lunched. They entered it, examined a number of rings, and finally chose one. Brown paid for it, and put it in his pocket ; but directly they were outside the shop, he produced it, took Mrs. Kronk's hand, and slipped it on her finger. As he did so, they heard someone laugh, and looking round, discovered Powell standing behind them.

"Congratulations !" he said, laughing again. "Years of joy to both of you! May I see the ring ?"

"I thought that—that you were in London," stammered Brown.

"I came back by the last train," replied Powell. "I was hurrying along to call on you when out you popped right in front of me. Ha, ha! To think of you two people billing and cooing, and buying engagement rings down here, while I was—"

"Trying to ruin Primrose Chapel up in London,"

put in Mrs. Kronk bitterly. "That's what you were doing."

Powell shrugged his shoulders, and said :

"Then I may take it, Mrs. Kronk, that you know everything?"

"You may," she snapped. "Mr. Brown has told me the whole miserable story."

"And—"

"And," she continued, "the game's up. The mortgage is to be renewed, and the police are to be informed about the jewels."

"Oh!" he said, looking at Brown, "that's the idea, is it?"

"Yes," replied Brown shamefacedly. "It's the right thing to do, and I've decided to do it. I'm afraid you'll think it very unkind of me; but I'm still prepared to give you some money to start a new career with, and to—"

"Suppose we discuss that presently?" interrupted Powell. "This is rather too public a place. Besides I want a few minutes to myself first."

"Mrs. Kronk and I were going on the pier," said Brown.

"All right! That'll do; I'll join you there."

Brown and Mrs. Kronk at once turned and walked on, with Powell following them at a little distance. They reached the pier again, passed through the turnstile, and sat down in the corner which they had occupied an hour or two before. Directly afterwards Powell stepped up to them.

"Well," he remarked, "I also have decided what to do. If you tell the police that the jewels are under the chapel, I shall—"

"Tell the chapel people that Mr. Brown was once a burglar?" suggested Mrs. Kronk. "You can do so if you like. We are quite prepared to face the consequences."

"Quite," added Brown; "although, of course, we'd rather you didn't."

"You have jumped to the wrong conclusion," said Powell, with a pleasant smile. "I don't propose to tell the chapel people anything. The police, however, are different. If you tell them where the jewels are, I shall tell them about others of our little burglaries."

"You mean—" began Brown.

"I mean that at present they know we were concerned in the Fluffy Fluff one, but not that we were concerned in half-a-dozen more besides. If I inform them of these—"

"They'll arrest us again," exclaimed Brown excitedly, "and try us again!"

"Precisely! And you'll be sent to penal servitude again. A long term, I expect. Here's a problem for you. You got five years for a single big burglary, how much will you get for half-a-dozen little ones? Now, just think that over carefully, my boy."

Brown and Mrs. Kronk exchanged glances of consternation.

"Is it true? Were there these others?" she whispered.

"Yes," he groaned.

She remained silent for a moment or two, and then said to Powell:

"It's an idle threat. You wouldn't do it for your own sake. You'd be sent to penal servitude as well."

"Perhaps ; and perhaps not," he replied. " You see, I should be King's evidence, and they might let me off altogether on that account. But even if they didn't, I'd serve my term cheerfully, satisfied with having had my revenge for the way I had been treated about the jewels. No, it's not an idle threat. I mean it in dead earnest."

"I'm afraid he does," whispered Brown to Mrs. Kronk.

"Well, what are we to do ?" she asked.

"Perhaps we'd better—" he began.

"Yes, you'd better stick to the original programme," put in Powell. "Foreclose on the chapel, and dig up the jewels. Give me one half, and Fluffy Fluff the other. Then renew the mortgage, and let the chapel go on again. I promise I won't trouble it or you any more."

Brown looked at Mrs. Kronk inquiringly. She shook her head, and said :

"It would be robbery. This Fluffy Fluff woman is entitled to the whole of them."

"Ah ! but I question that," said Powell. "I wrote her first song, *A Little Piece of Fluff*, arranged her first London appearance, and, in fact, made her the music-hall success she was, and thus enabled her to collect the jewels. Consequently, as Mr. Brown knows, I have always contended that I ought to have a share."

"Yes, I know," said Brown wearily. "And, for my part, I'd be willing that you should have one."

"But would she ?" asked Mrs. Kronk.

"Who ? Fluffy Fluff ? Yes, quite," replied Powell. "I saw her recently, and informed her

that I anticipated returning half of them to her. She was delighted, and as good as told me I could have the other half for my trouble."

"Still, it's not honest."

"Look here, Mrs. Kronk," said Powell persuasively, "please agree to our digging them up. It's the best course for all of us. Leave me out of the question, and simply consider the case of yourself and Mr. Brown. There'll be no scandal, no fresh term of penal servitude, no bother of any kind. Within twenty-four hours the jewels will be removed, and the chapel restored to the trustees. Then you can get married, and if you don't quarrel, live happily ever afterwards."

"I should be obliged," said Brown, with a frown, "if you'd refrain from referring to our marriage. It's nothing to do with you, and I don't want it to be."

"I'm disappointed. I was hoping you'd ask me to be your best man. However, we'll give all our attention to the jewels. Now, Mrs. Kronk, what have you decided?"

"So far as I am concerned," she replied coldly, "you can stick to the original programme. It's not strictly honest ; still, it's—well, it's expedient."

Powell breathed a sigh of relief; so did Brown, who had been greatly oppressed by the prospect of more penal servitude.

"But," she continued, a little maliciously, "you've got to reckon with other opposition besides mine. Miss Grass and Mr. Moon have been collecting money to pay off the mortgage."

"Is that so?" asked Brown.

"It is. And what's more, they are confident of getting together the amount required in time. Hadn't you heard anything about it, Mr. Powell?"

"Yes, but I had forgotten," he replied, in concerned tones. "Brown, we must defeat them! We'll go back to London at once, get everything ready, and take possession of the chapel at midnight, when the mortgage notice expires. They won't expect you to be so prompt, but you'll be acting perfectly legally. And if they bring you the money tomorrow, well and good. We shall have the jewels, and they can have the chapel."

"All right!" said Brown, accepting his lead, as he had on so many previous occasions. "Let me see; the next train is the one at six o'clock. We've got plenty of time. Suppose we have a cup of tea now. What do you think, Rachel?"

"I'm quite agreeable, James," said Mrs. Kronk.

"And so am I," said Powell.

A few minutes later the three were sitting in the refreshment-room at the end of the pier, drinking tea, and chatting together in fairly friendly fashion. But within Mrs. Kronk there was the unpleasant consciousness that, if she had not actually compounded a felony, she had done something very like it.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HARLEQUINADE

WHILE Mrs. Kronk and her companions were drinking tea at Brighton, Mr. Cox and Miss Summers began to dig for the jewels in London. It was some time since they had decided to do this ; but they had been delayed by difficulties in obtaining the necessary tools, and by a meeting with a prominent member of the Primrose congregation, who had insisted on discussing the mortgage question with them at great length.

Now that they had actually started, however, they worked steadily. First they removed the floor boards at the foot of Brown's seat in the chapel, which, according to the tunnel plan, was immediately over the jewels. Then they attacked the bed of concrete. This was the most difficult part of their task, in respect both of the amount of labour required, and of the danger of some passer-by hearing them. But they managed, in the course of an hour or two, to clear a couple of square yards without being interrupted.

"I think this'll be wide enough," said Miss Summers, at the end of that time. "Don't you?" "It should be," replied Mr. Cox. "At any rate,

we'll try. If we don't find the jewels when we are nine or ten foot down, we can widen out there."

"Very well. But how dark it's getting!"

"Yes; we want the gas. But if we turn it on, we increase the chances of detection."

"Still, we must do so," she said. "Light the burner at the side here. That'll be sufficient for us, and won't be very noticeable from the road."

Mr. Cox lit it, and then at once picked up a spade and resumed work. His fear of being discovered made him anxious to finish, and he accordingly dug with great energy. As there was only room for one in the hole, Miss Summers could not help actively. But she stood at the side, encouraging him to persevere, and searching for the jewel casket in each spadeful of earth he threw out.

"You ought to be near them now; you're quite ten foot down," she said, after he had been digging some time. "Oh, I do hope we shall find them!"

"So do I," he replied.

"It would be terrible if we didn't. Suppose this isn't really the place where they were buried? Suppose the tunnel plan was wrong? Suppose the tree stump Brown and Powell seem to have reckoned from belonged to another tree?"

"I'd rather believe that everything's all right."

"Of course you would! But I can't help feeling nervous. Suppose some workman came across them while the foundations of the chapel were being laid?"

"I know there are all those possibilities," he said. "Still, from the way Brown and Powell have been acting, I am fairly confident that we shall— Ah! what's this?"

He dropped the spade, and groped at the bottom of the hole.

"Have you got them?" she asked, gazing down eagerly. "Quick! have you got them?"

"I think so," he replied. "Here's a box, at any rate. Look! Is it the one?"

He handed it up. She snatched it from him, glanced at it in the light of the gas burner, and then kissed it ecstatically, and cried:

"Yes, yes, it's the one!"

Then, with a hysterical laugh, she staggered to a pew, and sank down in it. As she did so, Mr. Cox clambered out of the hole.

"Hadn't you better open it, and see that they are all right?" he said, pointing to the casket, which she was still holding in her hand.

"Will you open it for me?" she murmured. "I'm faint with the excitement."

He leaned over it. The lock had been broken on the night of the burglary, and a couple of clasps were now the only fastenings. He undid these, and threw back the lid. The jewels shone out brightly.

"Look at them!" she cried, with another hysterical laugh. "Aren't they splendid? Aren't they dazzling? Oh, Mr. Cox! I can't think how you've had the heart to keep them shut up in the dark all these years."

"I didn't know—" he began.

"Of course you didn't," she said, starting to her feet again, completely recovered from the faintness. "But that doesn't matter. Here, hold them for me. Thanks! I'm going to put them on at once—yes, at once. This necklace first. Ah! it seems almost

too good to be true. Now those rings. Aren't the sapphires sweet? And aren't the diamonds dainty? I believe I love them more than ever. Just see how this one sparkles!"

In a few moments she emptied the casket. As she clasped the last of its contents to her, she said:

"Have you got a looking-glass with you? Of course you haven't. But you can tell me how I look. Please do, Mr. Cox!"

She stepped nearer the gas burner, and posed theatrically. Her appearance was striking. The plain grey dress and linen collar she was wearing set off the jewels strangely well. Everywhere about her there seemed to be some, of one form or another. Rings shone from her fingers, bracelets from her wrists. Necklets, pendants, and brooches lay on her throat and bosom. A diamond star glittered in her hair. Mr. Cox shaded his eyes, partly in jest, and partly in earnest.

"How do you look?" he said. "Why, you look like—"

He stopped abruptly, and turned towards the door of the chapel. Someone had just knocked at it.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"Yes," she replied. "And there it is again."

They gazed at each other in consternation.

"We must open the door," he said. "I wish now that we hadn't locked it. I didn't expect that we should be so late. Whoever it is will think—"

"Dreadful things about us for being alone here after dark," she put in. "Well, as we've got the jewels, I don't mind that much."

"But I do. As officers of Primrose Chapel, our characters should be— Ah! another knock."

"I tell you what, Mr. Cox," she whispered. "Suppose I hide behind that curtain, while you see who it is?"

"Yes, that'll be best," he replied eagerly. "Probably it's nobody in particular, and I can get rid of him easily with some excuse. Then we'll fill up the hole, and go ourselves."

She hurried to the other side of the curtain she had indicated; and he, after lowering the gas a little, walked down the aisle and unlocked the door.

A moment later it was flung back on him violently, and someone stepped past it into the chapel.

"What—what—" began Mr. Cox.

He paused as he saw that the intruder was Powell, and that Brown and Mrs. Kronk were also entering. Some minutes before this the three of them had reached the chapel on their way home from Brighton. Powell had heard the sound of voices inside, and instinctively suspecting danger to the jewels, had insisted on demanding admission. Now, peering about him anxiously, he said to Mr. Cox:

"I beg your pardon for rushing in so clumsily! I hope I didn't hurt you. But—but—what's that you're carrying?"

The light was very dim, but he noticed by it the empty casket which Mr. Cox had absent-mindedly kept in his hand.

"It's—it's—private property," replied Mr. Cox hesitatingly.

Powell closed the door behind Brown and Mrs.

Kronk, who were by this time inside, and then hastily lit the gas burners near it.

"Yes, it's private property," said Mr. Cox, deciding what course to pursue; "but you can look at it if you like. Pretty, isn't it?"

Powell snatched it from him, and examined it quickly. The monogram on the lid confirmed the suspicion he had already formed that it was Fluffy Fluff's jewel casket. Uttering a loud oath, he started up the aisle towards the burial-place. But after he had gone a few yards he stopped, with another loud oath. He had seen the hole in the floor, and the heap of earth, and had realised the full truth.

"Hush!" said Mr. Cox, who had followed him. "Remember the building you're in."

"What the devil does it mean?" cried Powell, turning on him furiously. "How did you know they were there? Who is with you in the business? I heard more than one voice just now."

"There was more than one," replied Mr. Cox quietly.

"Then where—yes, and how—"

"One moment! I'm willing to explain matters to you and Mr. Brown; but what about—"

"What about me, do you mean?" put in Mrs. Kronk. "You needn't hesitate on my account. They've told me the story of the jewels. But oh! I wish they hadn't. I feel quite ill with the worry, and—"

"Yes, yes; and so do I," said Powell. "Now, Mr. Cox, quick! How did you find out that they were under the chapel? Where have you put them? Have you got them on you, or—"

"Softly! First let me ask if you and Mr. Brown recollect a man named Bill Spottem. Do you?"

They glanced at each other apprehensively, and then replied:

"Yes."

"Well," said Mr. Cox, with a dramatic wave of the jewel casket, "I am that man."

"You Bill Spottem!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

"I," he replied meekly. "Yes, to my shame I confess that I was once that betting, burgling scoundrel, Bill Spottem. But since then my heart has been completely changed, and—"

"And your appearance, too," broke in Powell. "I can't believe you're speaking the truth. And yet—and yet I have several times thought there was something familiar about you."

"And so have I," added Brown. "But your beard, and your spectacles, and your bald head, and—"

"Ah! those are the things that have kept you from recognising me. If they hadn't existed, you'd have seen who I was at once, and the race would have been off, so to speak."

"H'm!" remarked Powell, "there is certainly something familiar about your voice, too."

"Still, there's a difference," put in Brown.

"Which," said Mr. Cox, "is due to my having lost some teeth. But is it necessary to go on like this? I repeat that Bill Spottem and I are one and the same man. Surely you believe me?"

"I have it!" cried Brown. "Let me see if there's a mole on your left arm."

Mr. Cox rolled up his sleeve, and disclosed one just below the elbow.

"That's it," said Brown. "I noticed it when you were mending those bicycle punctures on the night of the burglary. You're Bill Spottem right enough."

Suddenly a fit of laughter seized Powell. So violent was it that it shook him to and fro, and forced him to support himself against the back of a pew. At last it passed, and he panted out:

"Pardon me! I had to give way. I could have stood Mr. Cox's being Spottem, and we three members of Primrose Chapel being all ex-burglars; but that mole business was too much for me. I've often seen it in novels and on the stage, but I didn't think it ever showed up in real life. Ha, ha! it's funny."

"Well, yes, I suppose it is," said Mr. Cox. "But we must remember that we have serious things to consider."

"True," said Powell, pulling himself together. "First, as to the jewels. If you're Bill Spottem, I'm quite willing that you should have a share of them; and I imagine you want one, in spite of your talk about a changed heart. But who are you working with? Whose voice did I hear besides yours?"

Up to the present time Miss Summers had remained hidden behind the curtain at the side of the chapel. Now she stepped out, and cried:

"Mine, Dick Powell—mine! And as to the jewels—well, look for yourself!"

He turned, and saw them sparkling on her. It was a cruel blow for him. All his plans and all his toil had been in vain; he was defeated, hopelessly

defeated. But he bore up bravely. Involuntarily, he bit his lip and clenched his hands. Then, with a laugh that almost rang true, he said :

"Congratulations, Fliffy! You've won the game, although how, I don't know. I'm not glad ; but I'm not sorry. Come and let me introduce you as Fluffy Fluff to dear Mr. Brown and his dear Mrs. Kronk. Afterwards you shall stand us all a champagne supper, to celebrate your triumph!"

"Thanks! but I prefer to introduce myself," she said, advancing towards them. "Yes, I'm Fluffy Fluff, and the jewels are mine. What do you think of it, Mr. Brown? And aren't you thoroughly ashamed of yourself for acting as you have about that mortgage?"

"I don't understand," murmured Brown, mopping his forehead. "You're Miss Summers!"

"And also Fluffy Fluff," explained Mr. Cox ; "just as I am also Bill Spottem. Yes, we've won the game—won it hands down!"

"Is it true?" said Mrs. Kronk to Miss Summers. "Are you indeed she?"

"I am!"

"And you," exclaimed Mrs. Kronk, turning to Powell angrily—"you knew all the time. You are the wickedest man I've ever met. Instead of telling Miss Summers where the jewels were, you've tried to ruin her, and Primrose Chapel, and Mr. Cox, and poor Mr. Brown—"

"Oh, hang it all! that's going too far," interrupted Powell. "Let's change the subject. What about that champagne supper, Fluffy? But no—I'm afraid I shan't be able to be present, much though I should like to

be. I'm leaving for America to-morrow, and must pack up, settle with my landlady, and so on, to-night. Good-bye, Fluffy—good-bye!"

He held out his hand. Miss Summers took it hesitatingly, and with an incredulous look, said :

"But—but you're not really going to America?"

"Yes, really—intend to make a fresh start in life, and that sort of thing," he replied ; and then, drawing her aside and lowering his voice, he went on : "I'm sorry for all that's happened. Please don't think too badly of me. I meant to give you half the jewels. And I meant to—but that doesn't matter. Good-bye, Fluffy dear! In spite of the way I've treated you, I've always liked you, and always wanted to marry you. Don't think too badly of me when I'm gone."

He pressed her hand, muttered a farewell to Mr. Cox and the others, and then turned away. Although he had tried to laugh off his defeat, he was fully sensible of its magnitude. He had lost the jewels, he had lost Fluffy Fluff, and he had lost his hold on Brown. Apart from these, there was no hope for him, an ex-convict, in England ; and emigration seemed to be in truth his wisest course. Still, it was not a pleasant one ; and his head drooped, and his feet dragged a little, as he walked towards the chapel door.

Miss Summers stood watching him irresolutely. She was conscious of an aching at her heart. Could the cause be that she was sorry he was going? Could it be that— Suddenly she noticed his dejected attitude, and as suddenly ceased to think and began to act.

"Dick!" she cried, running after him. "Wait a moment, Dick!"

He turned in surprise. She reached him, put her hand on his arm, and murmured:

"Must you go to America to-morrow? Won't you stop a bit, and write me those new verses for *A Little Piece of Fluff* you promised, and help me generally to get back on the music halls? Won't you, Dick?"

An expression of unwonted tenderness and seriousness came into his face while she was speaking, and there was a tremor in his voice as he replied:

"It's good of you, awfully good of you."

"That's all right," she murmured, in tones even lower than before. "And—and there's something else I wish to ask you. Did you mean what you said just now about having always liked me, and always wanted to marry me? Because if you did—"

"Yes?" he questioned.

"Because if you did, and if you proposed to me again, I might—well, I might give you a different answer."

"You're laughing at me," he said bitterly. "Still, I suppose I deserve it, and ought not to complain."

"No, no, I'm not!" she declared, so earnestly, that he knew he could believe her. "But for Miss Grass, and the other ways you annoyed me, I'd have consented the last time you proposed. And now—"

"Yes, and now?" he broke in eagerly. "Will you now? Fluffy, will you, will you marry me?"

"You can take me back to Mrs. Kronk," she replied, with a smile, "and announce our engage-

ment. She thinks you're the wickedest man she has ever met. But even if you are, I don't mind. You're good fun, Dick, and—and wicked people are always the nicest."

Arm-in-arm, they walked up the aisle to Mrs. Kronk, who, with Brown and Mr. Cox, was still standing near the hole in the chapel floor. As they reached her, Powell said :

"Congratulate me! For years I have been worrying Miss Summers to be my wife, and at last she has consented. A few hours ago I congratulated you on your engagement with Mr. Brown. Now you can—"

He was not allowed to finish.

"Pardon me, Dick; I didn't understand!" put in Miss Summers; and then, facing Mrs. Kronk, she went on : "Is it true that you and Mr. Brown are engaged?"

"Yes," faltered Mrs. Kronk. "And is it true that you and Mr. Powell are?"

"It is."

They looked at each other for a moment or two, and then simultaneously stepped forward, and embraced, and kissed. As they did so, Powell—in quick comprehension of their feelings—turned to Brown, and held out his hand. Brown smiled, and shook it heartily. Peace and friendship brooded over the group.

"This is most affecting," remarked Mr. Cox. "I congratulate you all. I trust that in due course I may be allowed to perform the two marriage ceremonies. It will give me peculiar pleasure to do so. And if—"

"Hush!" exclaimed Powell. "I hear people outside."

"A lot of them, too," added Brown. "And they're coming up to the door."

"Who can they be?" asked Mrs. Kronk.

Before anyone could reply to her question, the door opened, and a number of men and women began to file into the chapel. The foremost were Miss Minerva Grass and the Rev. Marmaduke Moon. The others included Mr. and Mrs. Lambert, and several more of the prominent Primrose members.

"That wretched mortgage business has brought them," whispered Miss Summers.

"I'm afraid so," said Mr. Cox. "But quick! let us stand in front of this hole, so that it won't be noticed."

He and the rest of the group at once proceeded to arrange themselves to the best advantage in this respect. By the time they had done so, Mr. Moon, Miss Grass, and their followers were all inside the building, and were advancing up the aisle towards them.

"Mr. Brown," said Mr. Moon, halting at a short distance, "I and Mr. Lambert have been trying to find you during the whole of this afternoon and evening. A little while ago we were informed that you had been observed to enter the chapel; and we have accordingly come round to see you, bringing with us some friends who happened to be in our company, and who are equally interested in the matter at stake."

"Hear, hear!" cried two or three of those behind him.

"Last month," he continued, "you gave notice to terminate the mortgage you hold on the chapel, and then unaccountably disappeared. To-day the notice expires, and you return, possibly thinking that the money is not ready, and that you will be allowed to foreclose. If so, you are mistaken. In spite of the shameless apathy of its present unworthy minister, Primrose Chapel has raised the amount required."

"Yes, the whole amount!" exclaimed Miss Grass, with a triumphant smile. "Seven hundred pounds in cash subscriptions, and thirteen hundred to be advanced by Mr. and Mrs. Lambert on a new mortgage. Two thousand altogether."

"A cheque for which," added Mr. Lambert, "I shall be prepared to hand to you to-night, Mr. Brown."

Brown bowed, but did not speak. Mr. Cox, however, did.

"Mr. Moon," he said sternly, "you used words just now which I cannot suffer to pass unchallenged. You brought against me the charges of shameless apathy, and of being unworthy of the ministry of this chapel."

"I did," said Mr. Moon defiantly, "and I decline to withdraw either. In bringing them, I am supported by the ladies and gentlemen behind me, and by many other members of the congregation. Indeed, I may take this opportunity of informing you that a special general meeting to consider the matter is about to be summoned. And I may add that Mr. Lambert proposes to submit to it a resolution for your dismissal and my restoration to the Primrose pulpit."

"Is this so?" said Mr. Cox to Mr. Lambert.

"It is," he replied nervously. "But I'm sorry that it is; and also that it has been referred to on the present occasion. You see, Mr. Cox, my wife and I both feel that you ought to have realised the gravity of the situation with regard to the mortgage, and done something to save the chapel. And—and—well, in short, that's the reason. I assure you that I didn't expect to meet you when I came here in search of Mr. Brown, and I repeat that I'm sorry the subject has been referred to now."

"You needn't apologise," commented Mr. Cox, in melancholy tones. "I quite understand your attitude. I suppose I must have seemed to be neglecting my duties. But there were special circumstances."

Mr. Lambert was about to inquire their nature, when he was interrupted by Miss Grass. Just before this, one of the new-comers, objecting to the semi-darkness of the building, had lit several more gas burners. As he did so, it occurred to Miss Summers that her jewels were becoming very conspicuous, and might provoke awkward questions. In order to hide them, she stepped behind Powell, forgetting that she had also to help to hide the hole in the floor, and unfortunately leaving a clear space in front of it. Through this Miss Grass chanced to glance.

"Look, Marmaduke! Look, everybody!" she now cried, pointing to the hole. "They've been breaking up the chapel. Look, look!"

The next moment she hurried towards it, followed by Mr. Moon and the rest of his party. To give them room, Powell and Miss Summers retreated into one of the pews, and Mrs. Kronk, Mr. Cox, and Brown into another adjoining it.

"There'll be no explaining this," said Mr. Cox.
"It's ten to one against me as minister."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Brown. "It's largely my fault, and I'd give anything to straighten out affairs. Yes, anything."

"And so would I," said Mrs. Kronk.

This whispered conversation had taken less than half a minute, but during it Powell had conceived a certain startling idea, had considered it, and had decided to act on it. Now he leaned over to Brown and Mrs. Kronk, and said :

"And so you two people would give anything to put matters right?"

"Yes."

"Then they shall be put right. I'm assuming though, Brown, that you've got that mortgage deed with you. Have you?"

"Yes, it's in my pocket. But how do you propose to—"

"You'll know directly. Now mind you, and Mrs. Kronk, and you others, all back me up properly. Whatever you do, don't appear to be surprised, or you'll spoil the whole show."

As Powell whispered the last words of this, he turned in the direction of the hole. Miss Grass and her companions were gathered round it, examining it curiously, and exchanging speculations as to the reasons for its construction. Powell looked at the group a moment or two, and then called out :

"Well, what do you think of it? I'm afraid it's puzzling you a bit. Would you like an explanation?"

"I, for one, should," replied Mr. Moon angrily.

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"I'm inclined to regard it as a deliberate attempt to—"

"Ah, yes," interrupted Powell, walking towards him; "but you'll change your opinion when you've heard what I am about to say. The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, you have arrived here just in time to witness an act of rare generosity. This hole has been dug as a burial-place. Mr. Brown will presently lay in it the ashes of the mortgage deed he holds on the chapel, thus foregoing freely and absolutely the debt of two thousand pounds which has been troubling you so much."

He paused, as if for observations. Mr. Lambert responded.

"Pardon the question," he said excitedly. "But is—is this true?"

"It is," replied Powell. "A month ago, out of his noble heart, and as a tribute to the memory of his friend, the late Mr. Zachariah Goodman, he resolved to make the sacrifice. With a sense of the dramatic, he then gave notice of his intention to terminate the mortgage, and then disappeared. To-day he has returned, with the deed in his pocket. And now, still with a sense of the dramatic, he proposes to burn it, and bury the ashes under the chapel. Miss Summers, Mrs. Kronk, Mr. Cox, and I were to have been the only witnesses; but perhaps it is as well that there should be you ladies and gentlemen besides."

He paused again, and for the first time since the beginning of his speech ventured to glance at Brown. He was standing at his full height, with folded arms, and a benevolent expression on his face. Powell

realised delightedly that he was going to do what was expected of him.

"This is indeed rare generosity!" exclaimed Mr. Lambert. "My wife and I are more touched by it than we can express."

"And so am I," murmured several others.

"As for me," said Mr. Moon spitefully, "I refuse to believe it until I actually see the deed burned."

Brown had in truth decided, after a severe mental struggle, to do what was expected. Powell's audacious idea had at first simply enraged him; but on quick reflection he had perceived that there were great advantages attending its adoption. The odium he had incurred on account of the mortgage would pass, and he would be more popular and respected at Primrose Chapel than ever before; the hole in the floor, and other suspicious things, would all be satisfactorily explained; Mr. Cox would no longer be in danger of being ousted by Mr. Moon. These considerations, together with a feeling of gratitude that his worries about the jewels had ended, and a whisper of encouragement from Mrs. Kronk, had prevailed. He was ready to give up the two thousand pounds; and he proposed to do it as cheerfully and effectively as possibly.

"Well, Mr. Moon," he said, advancing towards the hole, and producing the deed, "you shall see me burn it. But before doing so, I wish to make a remark or two as to Mr. Cox. The charges that have been brought against him are undeserved, and—"

"Excuse me," put in Mr. Lambert. "I may say at once that my wife and I have completely changed

our views on that point. We now understand what Mr. Cox meant when he spoke of special circumstances in connection with his attitude towards the mortgage question. He of course knew your real intentions, and consequently knew there was no need for anxiety. And understanding this, my wife and I are again his staunch supporters. We shall not entertain for another moment the idea of dismissing him in favour of Mr. Moon, and we do not think any one else will either."

"Hear, hear!" cried nearly everybody present.

Miss Grass, however, said indignantly :

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mr. Lambert. First you—"

"I agree with you, Minerva, in protesting," interrupted Mr. Moon. "But suppose we wait until Mr. Brown has proved the truth of this curious story. I am still very doubtful about it."

Brown smiled, opened the deed, and handed it to him, saying :

"Just make sure that it's the right one. Your signature is on it, as that of the former minister."

Mr. Moon, together with Mr. and Mrs. Lambert, and several others who crowded round him, carefully examined the deed.

"Well?" questioned Brown, after a few moments.

"Yes, it's the one," replied Mr. Moon, giving it back to him. "And now—"

"And now," said Brown, "you shall see that the story is true. Look!"

The next moment he struck a match, and held it to a corner of the deed. All watched eagerly. The flame caught, and spread slowly along the parch-

ment ; inch after inch turned black, and curled up. Still all watched eagerly.

Suddenly Miss Summers picked up something from the pew behind her, and offered it to Brown, with the words :

"Here! let the ashes drop on this. I don't want it, and you can bury it with them."

It was her jewel casket, open and empty. He took it in his free hand, crushed the burnt part of the deed into it, and held the remainder over it. She glanced at Powell. He smiled, and then drew her arm through his, and walked away from the group.

"I'm glad you did that," he said, when they were out of earshot. "It was a pretty idea."

"And yours was a great one," she rejoined. "Hard on Brown, though. Two thousand is a lot to lose."

"Oh, he's got plenty more!"

"Yes, I suppose so. At any rate, he's got Mrs. Kronk to console him, and that's something. And now, Dick, what's our programme for the rest of the evening? Shall we go up west, and have that champagne supper? There's time; and—and, well, I should like to show off my jewels a bit, you know."

"Naturally you would," he replied, with a laugh. "I'm with you, Fliffy."

"Then come on!" she exclaimed. "We'll get my cloak, and start at once. Somebody else can turn those people out, and lock up. I'm not going to."

A few moments later they left the chapel. As they did so, they heard a noise, and looking back, saw that Brown had just dropped the jewel casket

into the hole, and that Mr. Cox, Mr. Lambert, and others were applauding him vigorously.

"The play's over," remarked Powell, closing the door. "It's been good fun; but a little irreverent, I'm afraid. Still—"

"Yes, still—" said Miss Summers; and then, tapping her foot on the pavement, and smiling happily, she began to hum:

"I'm a little piece of fluff,
A mad little, bad little piece of fluff . . .
Of fliffy fluffy fluff, of fluffy fliffy fluff. . . ."

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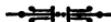
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